

332 Shakespeare Warrior to Actor

Voiceover: This program is sponsored by Chicago Shakespeare Theatre.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs. This is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

Clarke: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents*, featuring Shakespeare and the Citizen Soldier: Warrior to Actor with Stephan Wolfert of the Veterans Center for Performing Arts and Dr. Truman Anderson. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago, and it's sponsored by the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre. This program and more than 500 others covering a full range of military topics is available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. It may not be typical for an army officer to go from the battlefield to the theater, ending a career of treating wounded soldiers to become a theater actor, writer, and director, yet Stephan Wolfert has made this transition and now works to help other veterans readjust to civilian life and perhaps follow a similar path to the fine arts. Drawing on his own transition from a life in the military to a career in theater, Wolfert is here to discuss the utility of theater and explain his De-Cruit program which assists military personnel in rejoining their communities using applied psychology and classical author training in the Veterans Center for Performing Arts. Stephan Wolfert served in the US Army as a medic and infantry officer from 1986 until 1993. He received his Master of Fine Arts degree from Trinity Repertory Conservatory. Stephan worked on Twyla Tharp and Billy Joel's Tony Award Winning production *Movin' Out*, creating and directing the military sequences. Combining his own personal story of leaving the army and pursuing a career in the arts with Shakespeare's writing on war, he created the solo piece *Cry Havoc!*, which he has performed across the country. He has directed and taught Shakespeare at Antelope Valley College and Cornell University. He is currently based out of New York City where he performs half of the two-man theater company Deux Bites. Dr. Truman Anderson is executive director of the Stuart Family Foundation in Lake Forest, Illinois. During his twelve-year tenure with the foundation he has overseen the development of grant making programs on national security, the media, federal elections, and civic education. He was previously a lecturer in international history at the London School of Economics, specializing in German history and the World Wars. Dr. Anderson is a former Marine Corps infantry officer and holds a doctorate in international history from the University of Chicago. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Stephan Wolfert and Dr. Truman Anderson.

(Applause)

Anderson: Thank you very much for the introduction. Stephan, welcome to Chicago.

Wolfert: Thanks for having me.

Anderson: Delightful to have you here. A real honor. So much to discuss. I'd like to begin by having you give us a little bit of your background, because you are a Midwesterner.

Wolfert: Yes, I am.

Anderson: Not intimate with the city of Chicago. You are from our neck of the woods.

Wolfert: I am, from NFL rival, though, too, so don't hate on me too much. Yeah, I'm from La Crosse, Wisconsin, just right up the way. Was born and raised there. Went to school at La Crosse, University of Wisconsin La Crosse there for a year and a half, then joined the army and went out and about. The army sent me back to La Crosse to go to school, then went about, as I talk about in the play and we will discuss. And then graduate school for theater in Rhode Island. Then lived in New York, worked in New York with

Twyla Tharp there for a while among other projects. LA for ten years, and now back in New York.

Anderson: Very good. *Cry Havoc!*, your one-man show, is an effort to focus the experience of the veteran in general throughout time, the American experience certainly, and your own experience as well interlays particularly with the work of Shakespeare, which you have found throughout your career to be especially relevant to understanding the soldier's experience and in both its celebrated and more problematic aspects. Let's talk a little bit--because the story is quite personal, let's talk a little bit about La Crosse and about how you ended up in the army. You were not necessarily destined for it, I think, by temperament. You were a bit of an odd fit. Why the army? How did that come about?

Wolfert: (Chuckles) That would require some therapy sessions I think. I--well, I don't know, I wanted--for all the reasons that I hear so many people join the military. I didn't--even though I wasn't unpopular, I wasn't bullied, I don't have major trauma that I can talk about from high school and say that I was a complete loner, but I didn't feel like I belonged. I missed a good hunk of high school because I had been paralyzed in a wrestling accident, so I was out a lot medically and then wasn't able to be part of any particular group. I was always attracted to the theater, but I didn't have the courage to actually embrace it all the way. And again as I talk about in the play, I've always--from the time I was a little kid I wanted to be a dancer. I mean, I didn't know that; I wasn't able to articulate it as a child. It's more looking back now. But I was always performing and dancing and goofing off. And my sister Lisa was always encouraging me to do it. But it wasn't that era. That location I would argue wasn't really--I wasn't surrounded by any examples of people who were standing up and saying, "I'm an artist, I'm a dancer. I do professionally, not for a hobby." Which is what I was convinced was the case, that you do it for a hobby, not for a living. And too, that you can do it and it's still considered masculine, and I was very much caught up in what could be described as the gender binary--what's masculine, what's feminine. I was so caught up in that. It's a blue-collar town I'm from. I'm particularly from the blue-collar part of town.

Anderson: Of La Crosse.

Wolfert: North La Crosse, north side of La Crosse. Very blue collar. Very invested in what's manly and what's feminine, and with that binary of manly masculine being quiet, unemotional, strong. Therefore the feminine being weak, emotional, and all these types of things--those types of stereotypes and generalizations. And I was raised with it and gave over to it. Caved and didn't believe in it--and I didn't have anyone, like I said. I remember Baryshnikov, when he defected as a kid and thinking, "Wow, he's considered a manly man, and look what he does." And I was so attracted to that. I wanted so badly to be a dancer, but I joined the army.

Anderson: We had different rules for Russians for some reason.

Wolfert: Yes, right. Right.

Anderson: But so, you could say you suffered a delayed onset of your theater career by means of a very somewhat unusual digression. Into the army. So you enlisted in the army and were initially trained as a medic and served for several years in that capacity, and the army identified you as a perspective officer, sent you, as you said, ironically back to La Crosse to finish your education and go through Army ROTC up there. And then you became an infantry officer, went through typical assignments that we associate with that. But you had a difficult interval that in *Cry Havoc!* you identify particularly with a training accident that took place at Fort Irwin, California. I'm not sure everyone understands. Fort Irwin, like Twentynine Palms is to the equivalent of the Marine Corps, is a place where army units go to do particularly realistic and intensive live fire training. Tell us what happened and how it affected you.

Wolfert: I'll give you the basics of it. I'm again looking back with the hindsight of being 20/20, to be able to have that introspection of what was actually going on. I realize now that I was having some doubts of my role in the military--is this me—already, but wasn't aware of it, wasn't necessarily completely conscious of it. But yeah, we were on, last night of our deployment. We were up for the opposing forces, so it was a three-week deployment as opposed to the--when you're the friendly forces it's shorter. And yeah, we were on a live fire—and as I talk about in the show it was for Bradleys, Bradley fighting vehicles, and our observer controller vehicle, an M113, was mistaken for a target, and by—don't know that I can even go into all the details of it, but we took friendly fire, and a hunk of metal bounced around inside and hit my friend in the face, and actually he ended up dying. His body survived for a while, but when he passed it really, really rocked me-- that we're in training and what are we doing, and who am I, and how I was dealing with it. Again, all these emotions coming up and thinking I couldn't have those emotions. And in the midst of it-- I'm gonna talk about it in the show, and you had asked about it--so I went AWOL. Technically I was AWOL. I had people that cared very much about me, knew what was going on with me and identified with it, one in particular being a Vietnam veteran, so I think he recognized it right away and said, "He needs to process this." They covered for me, but I was technically AWOL. And I ended up seeing Shakespeare's *Richard III*. And to see that character come out. I had never--I don't recall ever seeing or reading a Shakespeare play. If I had, it certainly didn't lodge in my brain. But I understood it. And to see this guy come out--to see a veteran come out and stand in front of me, 'cause he was in uniform, and look direct audience address, I didn't come from theater, I didn't know they did this and thought I was in the dark and couldn't be seen, and to have him say, "I trained in the military, I was really good at it, and now it's over, and I don't know who the heck I am. I don't know what I'm supposed to do now. I don't have an identity now."

Anderson: So as the opening of the play says, Richard is not just a veteran, and a real veteran, a man who has slain an enemy one to one on the battlefield, but he's also carrying prior emotional baggage that he brought with him into the soldier's life, and you talk about that quite a bit in your work, not just in reference to yourself in the show but the veterans whom you work with. Say a little about that, about the way the transition into becoming a soldier often involves the releasing of aspects of your character that are in place before you come in, just as Richard says.

Wolfert: Absolutely. Yeah, I'd love to, because the play--when I started the play, I started with the question of what the--can I say, what the heck is wrong with me, right. But for me I was like, what is wrong with me? And I started from that place and then also realizing that in graduate school, I heard Shakespeare differently than my other classmates and other people who weren't veterans. I was hearing--I related to Lady Percy's speech differently, more personally of course, but heard it differently in Henry's speech and Coriolanus. And I heard them--when I heard them describe them, I thought that's not what I got out of it. I got something else. So not only would they represent language for me sometimes what I was going through, but sometimes they would elicit in me feelings, memories, thoughts that I didn't even know I had. So as I was doing this I wanted--as I went, "What is wrong with me?" I really was convinced that the army was responsible for all of my problems. (Laughs) And after going through the process of creating the play, working with other veterans, and continuing to do this classical actor training, which is really in my opinion ancient psychological training, I realized I went into the military with issues, virtually all of them, that the military isn't responsible for it. They're not the bad guy. My issues were exacerbated by it and I certainly gained some more trauma in the military, but I went in with a lot of the stuff. The insomnia, some of the rage issues--a lot of these things I went in and was exacerbated. So as I unpacked it

I not only understood more deeply what was going on with me and what I had beforehand, but the process of how to do that and then would give my process to other veterans and they went, "Oh yeah, I'm realizing that same thing for me." And that's how De-Cruit came about, as we were recruited but not de-cruited.

Anderson: Let's talk about that, because it's really, that's kind of the overarching thing of what you're doing. Connects all of your work. This experience of coming into the army, been trained, conditioned to perform a role, which is unlike any other really in our society. It is absolutely unique.

Wolfert: Yeah.

Anderson: It involves the deployment of aspects of our character that we are in peacetime encouraged to suppress and control, and yet in military context they have to be brought out.

Wolfert: Yup.

Anderson: Inhibitions that we feel about violence have to be overcome, and yet they also have to be mastered because military violence can't be uncontrolled. It has to be focused.

Wolfert: Right, right.

Anderson: So tell us a little bit about your reaction to your military training, to this process of conditioning, and then we'll go on to talk a little bit about the problem you've identified. The military does a great job of standing people up for these roles, recruitment as you say, and a terrible job of de-cruitment. There is no de-cruitment or facilitating the veterans' reintegration into civil society that is really up to scratch. So tell us about your reaction to your own military training. You enjoyed recruit training. You enjoyed becoming an officer.

Wolfert: Yes. There were--I got great--I absolutely got tremendous gifts from my time in the military, and then some baggage with it as well. I mentioned--there's a couple of things I do want to tap on when you said the military does recruit us but doesn't do de-cruitment, because we've not made it their job. And if there are some, it's not as--there aren't as many resources, time effort and money, applied to de-cruitment as there is for recruitment training up into military life or military function, shall I say. But as far as my personal experience, yeah, I discovered as I was going through--and pull me back on track if I'm misunderstanding this and going off track, but as I went through and then became officer--went through the training myself and then train others, then I was able to dissect it and step back a bit and go, ah, look at the narrative and see this is what we're doing. That we do have to not only have to wire us, what I always call wire for war--and I mean it quite literally, not with judgment, but literally. They teach us to respond to orders without thought. That's what basic training is for, to groom us and then to eliminate the folks who can't do that. And then arguably to respond to a threat through violence, certainly for the infantry. And even for those who--if you're a water purification specialist. Even if you're a water purification specialist, let's say, you still learn to fire the weapon. You still learn how to do the basic functions of the military. And even when you get to your advanced job, water purification specialist, it's still a life-or-death consequence, and you might be eighteen years old. And your decisions matter. So the attention to detail, the skills that are trained are done under the most heightened circumstances. Combat, what can be more life-or-death than that? But then when we're done--we've done that for a four-year minimum usually--then out you go. You're amputated from that community of comrades. You're amputated from our structure, from our missions, from our purpose, and we're dumped back into the community.

Anderson: And it's hard even in peacetime, even for the peacetime person.

Wolfert: Yes, and the proof is the newest data on the suicides. I hate to go there and use that as our data, but just one of many data points to look at for this is the current suicide

rate. The most comprehensive examination says that there's twenty a day, and that's not just combat veterans, and it's not just post-9/11. In fact disproportionately the rate is higher among female vets and among men over the age of fifty. That's not post-9/11. That's a lot of Cold War era vets. So what's going on? Then we have to start examining in my opinion what's going on there, what's causing that. There's a lot of factors here, but I do personally believe that having gone through it and having had bouts of suicide, real serious prolonged bouts of being suicidal, battling addiction, even homelessness--even though I had a place to go I couldn't go to my parents for whatever reason. So where does that come from and why? So that's what we're examining. I'm more obsessed with the transition out of the military service than what was your service. I don't necessarily care what you did. I want to know what are you going through now, and then the way I approach it is just flat out through theater, and the specifically language I choose is Shakespeare, 'cause he wrote veterans so brilliantly, and he wrote the human being so brilliantly. He so perfectly brings out of us these questions that so many of us are examining.

Anderson: I was going to ask you why of course, war, warfare and the soldier's experience--there's been a lot of theater written about it, a lot of good theater. But what is it about Shakespeare that strikes you as particularly helpful or relevant? Does it have something to do, for example, with the kind of novelistic quality of a Shakespeare play, where you have soliloquies, where you get into the head of a character in a way where maybe in a more modern drama that would not be the case?

Wolfert: Yes, and maybe more. I think that--I feel that Shakespeare allows us to get into the head and body, as Tina Packer would say--the body of the character, for us to embody ourselves and find it. Because Shakespeare not only has written--not only written about veterans brilliantly and the transition, which I'll get to in a second, but also he writes in the natural rhythm of the human. He writes in iambic pentameter, which is our heartbeat. Ba-boom, ba-boom, ba-boom. And the pentameter being roughly about the line of thought that we naturally speak in. So when I bring people in, the vast majority of vets I work with don't want to be actors, and the vast majority have not been exposed to Shakespeare, just like me. And that's my favorite, 'cause they come in and I don't go into the iambic pentameter 'cause we already do it. I say, "Just do a line of verse. Take a breath before you speak again." To be or not to be, that is the question. (Breathes) Ah, right they take the breath and realize I know what that's like. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer (breathes) the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, right. So it's already there. He forces us as listener and actor to embody just by the way he writes it. So that alone, and then yes, also the head of it. What is the question I'm asking? And so often he's also writing about the two of us. Am I this or am I this? To be or not to be. Claudius' speech in Hamlet also, of--like a man to double business bound. Stand and pause where I shall first begin. And both neglect. He becomes so incapacitated that he goes the other way. Not only is he worried about taking--he takes none. He gets paralyzed. I know what that's like as well, and so many people do. So that's why Shakespeare. And then of course because he wrote about vets and specifically the transition. Because he was surrounded by veterans.

Anderson: One of the difficult features of the transition that comes out in your work in the play *Cry Havoc!* is the sense of alienation and even something of a contempt for civil society. We mentioned it already in Richard's speech, these times of peace that I am not comfortable with at all.

Wolfert: Coriolanus.

Anderson: Coriolanus. The military definitely inculcates into the recruit a sense of separateness and the condescension towards--

Wolfert: Hotspur, Hotspur speech. Another one, sorry. Go on. (Laughs) There's just so many where he gets it and nails it.

Anderson: And so when the transition comes, when the young man or young woman leaves the service, they are reintegrating into something that they have been conditioned to look askance at to say the least.

Wolfert: Yes. Yeah, we--basic training, right, what do they--there's the cliché, we're broken down so they can build us back up against into the military's image, into a marine, a soldier, a sailor, an airman, airwoman, or coastguard service member. So they build us up, and so that already creates a separation, that I've been through and seen things that you haven't. And on top of it there's built in that binary, and by binary, friend or foe. All of our training is go/no-go. There are no Cs or Ds. It's go/no-go. You failed; you passed. Shoot or don't shoot. Kill or don't kill. Pull the trigger or don't pull the trigger. Call in the air strike or don't. It's all built up that way, so it makes sense, perfect sense that the civilians then would be put into the same binary. And that binary, like I said, we enter with it. I really thought, oh, that's the military. But no, we go back to what you opened with asking me, that gender binary--what is a man, what is a woman? Or at least in the stereotype. So I went in with that, and the military was able to take that binary and go, "Ah, here's how we're gonna use it to that large effect and build that binary." So as we train together, we became comrades, and that camaraderie is the very foundation of our training, but then it creates a separateness and makes everyone else the other.

Anderson: You combine these two things, a sense of certainly in the American armed forces, a lot of respect for but still a sense of superiority towards civil society. When you volunteer in order to uphold and protect this society, you do love it, but you are taught to look at yourself as a soldier as someone who had assumed a special responsibility that a lot of people don't assume, at this point in our history at any rate. And then on top of that you get the forging of these extremely strong bonds among men and women who serve together in the same units. So you talk about this very eloquently in the show, and I'd like you ask you to expand a little bit on this, on the comradeship angle.

Wolfert: Yeah, well, and I mentioned--and tell me if this isn't the track, but there was a lot of research done when the Soviet Union fell to compare comrade-based training versus ideologically-based training, 'cause it was--the Soviet Union, former Soviet Union was largely ideologically based, whereas we have been comrade-based. And the question was, is this better or not, and what components can we take and what components are we reinforcing as ours working, and what does and what doesn't. And it turns out camaraderie is one of the best forms of training. I'll even bring up Kent Harber, who I'm lucky enough to work with, at Rutgers University, does what's most famously--or what's most generally called the Hill Test, where he takes people--it's a psychology test, and it shows camaraderie, so I--believe it or not, I'm gonna answer your question, but I can tend to ramble on. But he takes people to a hill. And the steepness of the hill is measured by a survey, and the steepness of the hill is determined by who we're with. So if we're alone, it's much steeper. If we're with close personal friends, it's considered--it's rated less steep. If we're with strangers, I forget, I think it's somewhere in between. But we're with other people, so it's less steep. And the military grabs that and says, "Okay, we might hate each other, but you have to cover my back 'cause that's how you're getting home." And as far as swearing our oaths to duty on our country in the army at least, yeah, it's--as I say in the play, those are wonderful things to raise my hand and swear to, but to actually pull the trigger for, it's--I can't quite wrap my brain around it. But to cover your back, yes, if it's him or you, that I can get better. Even better than him or me.

Anderson: I think in civilian life you find this kind of strong bond developing in certain careers, and not so much in others. You think of police and firemen who are extraordinarily close--

Wolfert: Yes. Their lives depend on it.

Anderson: --groups of people. And also policemen I think like veterans, have a very hard time with eventually hanging up the badge. The sense of comradeship is so terribly, terribly important to them.

Wolfert: And there have been—they're now being put back into the community from which they were policing.

Anderson: Right. So what do you hear--in the veterans you're working, what do you hear about separation from comrades as being a difficult part of the reintegration?

Wolfert: Well, it's as varied as there are veterans we're working with. And I'm very lucky to work with--so with Bedlam, the theater company I'm with, Eric Tucker's company in New York, the outreach program we do is every Monday night, fifty-two Mondays of the year we meet, and it's theater. There's no flags and banners. So because of that we've gotten an absolute range of vets that I've not seen in any other programs. From Korean War era, we even had a WWII vet until he passed. But Korean War era, Vietnam, in between, post-9/11, and everywhere in between. So when I ask different questions, in some cases you get different responses, but everyone says even if they had a bad experience in the military it was much harder when they got out. Even the ones who said I hated my unit. Or in one case there was a vet who was air force airman attached to an army unit, so he's already ostracized. On top of it he was a photographer with an infantry unit, so he's-- basically his off time was hanging out with the Iraqi interpreters. He was that ostracized. And yet when he got out he felt more camaraderie with the service members he was in than the civilian world and felt absolutely lost for years and had really, really severe traditional issues. And I think that generally is what I'm hearing, even for the ones who transition seamlessly and invisibly, meaning that no one around them knows they're vets. 'Cause the vast majority of military veterans do not self-identify as veterans when they get out. And that's statistically throughout at least contemporary history. So even if they're able to do it seamlessly and invisibly, it's not to say they're not having issues. And when they get in that room where we can--and that's what theater offers is a safe, secure room to speak as Shakespeare puts it, to speak what we feel and not what we ought to say, they'll actually admit, yeah, I really struggled or I still struggle even though it's been thirty years. I still struggle, especially when people complain about this or what have you. So yeah, that is on unifying factor I hear a lot.

Anderson: There are surely--we've talked about this being generally difficult for all veterans because the cultural stamp is so deep that's impressed upon you in the service, but there are surely special problems that combat veterans contend with, and you talk a lot about that in *Cry Havoc!*. Issues like--well, you bring it out with your description of the phenomenon of the berserker. The soldier whose rage becomes all-encompassing and then has to put it back into the bottle. And then has a great deal of difficulty with that after the war. What about your own experiences in that sense, dealing with a sense of rage, frustration, perhaps related to guilt, perhaps related to loss?

Wolfert: My own experience was--yeah, I absolutely had great--and I still fight it. I mean, within this month I put my foot through our foam core door again. I thought I was doing so well. It had been about a year. And I go through about an iPhone every eight months. That's--my wife keeps track. Even though they're in the Otter case, I still manage to really throw it just right and destroy it. And I got out in '93, but I still--I still struggle, and again I wanted to blame the military and say, you know, "It's PTS, and I've got this," but when I unpacked it all--and really it started doing the play and doing my own narrative--that's why I say one-man shows or one-woman shows are cliché, I think everyone

should do it because theater as the Native American community taught me is medicine. And it really is therapeutic for me and therapy. But what I was able to unpack from that is that my rage was rooted in shame--deep, deep shame, and turns out it's all the way from some childhood incidences that I would never have imagine. All my life if anybody asked me, if I ever brought it up, I would say, "Oh, god, I was six. Why would that bother me now?" But when I really unpacked it, sure enough, just deep, deep, deep, deep, deep shame from this, to the point where I would describe this self-loathing at a DNA level. And psychology and psychiatry shows us that's where this rage--one of the places rage can come from. As far as the berserker, I'd use a different version of the term, but now I tend to, when I'm talking about it, use Jonathan Shay's description of the berserker from his book *Achilles in Vietnam*, where talks about when we receive a moral injury--he actually does a formula for it. When we receive a moral injury, and a moral injury simply--when something--not simply. When everything we consider--and forgive my description of it, John, if you ever by chance see this. Everything that we hold to be morally correct is wronged or destroyed, and it's usually by somebody who has power over us or authority, whether it's a parent or an adult 'cause we're a kid or a teacher or a commander or NCO, a higher rank, someone who destroys what we hold to be morally correct. And when it's destroyed, it's an injury and it's a preexisting condition for the berserker because something has been changed in us. And now when incidents come up, people tend--not tend to, but one of the things that can happen is the berserker goes numb and just destroys, goes quite literally berserk. Other people can go the other direction where they become completely numb and paralyzed and don't function at all. And that's I went more berserker. And I'll never forget that right after the first Gulf War in which I did nothing--I trained throughout the entire thing. The hose--I had an Isuzu Trooper, and hose caught on one of the tires as I was trying to fill my leaky tires, and it caught, and I pulled on it so hard that I ripped the hose and broke it. So now I'm angry, and I started wailing on my truck with the medal end. Destroyed the hood and windshield and got done and now felt worse about myself 'cause I had just done all that damage. And it didn't make the situation better, but it just--right there it came out. So once I realized that, there's no magic pill. I'm still struggling with it, but if I can do the plug of what this work does, the classical actor training--

Anderson: Please do.

Wolfert: So Shakespeare gives me the language to help understand what's going on with me, or like I said, either gives the language for me to express it or bring sup the feelings, the classical actor training gives me the physiological means to deal with it. So before I go on stage, not necessarily this because everyone's so nice. They're like, oh, here you go, and there's cameras and lovely smiles coming back to us. But before I go onstage doing a play, backstage we ground and breathe. Well, that's the same thing you do in yoga, meditation, any type of mindfulness training that's with--that's an ancient practice. That's where classical actor training begins. To ground and breathe. Well, we use that then in the room and they can--veterans, they being veterans can apply that to real life when they have an anxiety attack, when they have a moment of un-grounding or a moment of a PTS symptom coming on or, boom, a loud noise happens and (gasp) the berserker starts to come out, or something triggers us, they can, (breathes) begin the recovery process.

Anderson: What passages of Shakespeare are particularly helpful in this context?

Wolfert: In that context?

Anderson: What do you have them read?

Wolfert: It depends. I'm not deflecting; I'll give you several. But it depends on the person's--what they're dealing with. I created this--this is one of mine. I stole from everybody. And I credit them when I do it. So make no mistake. Everything I'm saying is

from Yvette Nolan of Native Earth or Randy Reinholz of Native Voices or Tina Packer of Shakespeare and Company or Elisha Alley who is a brilliant psychologist/researcher. So I steal from all of them. But something I was able to come up with that I think was relatively uniquely mine is that I lifted Shakespeare's monologues and have attributed them to symptoms of PTS, and/or, even if they're not PTS, transitional issues we've had. And what I do is I list them out and then I let the veteran choose, and I say, "What thing from this list are you struggling with most today right now?" So it doesn't matter. It doesn't have to be, "Well, my greatest thing is this." It's today insomnia, today rage, today whatever. They pick it, and then they get a corresponding monologue. So I've picked so many--

Anderson: It's that precise?

Wolfert: Right, and then I have them read it, and frankly I just have them read verse. I don't do the sort of typical scene study things of, tell them, "Here's what's going on in the play." I don't care. I decontextualize it to see if it--or by giving it to them and saying, "What do you think this means given right now the state that you're in just reading it a line at a time?" and by decontextualizing it, they're re-contextualizing it to their own life.

Anderson: How often do the vets pursue the story further? Are they hungry to know then what happens the rest of the play, who this person is?

Wolfert: Yeah. Oh, yeah, most of the time. That's not to say they go out and read it or even watch the movie. We'll often watch a movie together, the movie version of--if we're all working on the same thing, but because I draw from so many different plays it's tough to do that. But for example we were working on the Scottish play, and I've got to say MacB in case anyone--if you're superstitious I don't want to say the full name, but Shakespeare's Scottish play or MacB, which is the cursed play--when we worked on that, what I did was assign different scenes and monologues to everyone so for once we were all working on the same play. And then after working on it for months to the point where they were ready to beat me bloody, I said, "Let's run them in order." And once we did that, they all went, "Ohh, now, okay this gives a new--" And especially seeing other vets because I very often will have them do prompted writing so that they can do their own gateway into it of when I enlisted, for example is one of my favorite prompts. When I enlisted...and just write for fifteen minutes. And then from that I'll give them a monologue so then they'll read a bit of that into that monologue and other vets hear it and go, "Oh, right," and that's how my monologue and my experience--and now we have a point of discussion. And that's what I'm after. I'm not after doing the play necessarily. I'm not after--like I say, there's no pity, no apology, no political agenda. We're just in the room to unpack our stuff using this guy's work. And whatever it brings up for each one of us is what I'm interested in for that room. We don't discuss anyone outside the room, so no politics, no discussing the debate that was on. It's none of that. It's what are you dealing with--that's why I give that list. What are you dealing with today right now? So--but I can list some of the monologues if you want, but I got way off base on you.

Anderson: No, no, that's alright. That's exactly what I was after. As you reflect on the experience of these workshops, what are some of the obvious things that jump out to you that we could be doing that we're not doing to wrestle with various facets of the difficult transitions?

Wolfert: Discussing stuff openly and honestly, period. As I--I've now traveled throughout most of the country doing the play as well as Canada and even into Italy--into Rome, Italy doing the play, doing workshops, discussing it, doing keynotes and discussing it after, and each community will say--the reason I do a talkback after the show is to start the engagement right then, to really start asking the questions. It's not about me or the play or the writing process. We can talk about the theater component of it, but it's really more about, let's answer this question. The question I'm posing in the play is now what.

Now what do we do? Now that I've shared this knowledge with you, what do we as a community do? And so often I hear people, "We've got to get Congress to do this," or, "We've got to get the VA to do that." But I always turn it back on them. "But what do you do for a living or what do you do to contribute or what is it that we can do in this room to make a difference?" And one of the things now that I come back to instead of creating a De-Cruit in every community, although I'd love to do that, the more realistic thing I think is just, let's just get in the room and really speak honestly to break down the taboos. And we were joking earlier as we were swapping some military stories, a lot of these stories we can't share outside the veterans community because it's--as Alana, who attends our Monday nights, and she gave me permission to say it, she says I don't often share a lot of my stories because I don't want to depress anyone or have them feel bad for me. And even if it's--she said sometimes even if it's a funny story but there's a twist--it's a bad story but then there might be--there's humor that came out of it, and it's a dark sort of humor, and very often veterans find they're afraid to share it with mixed company. But what I'm saying is let's get in a room where that is what we were planning on doing. And that is what theater can do, to where we have veterans and civilians and say, "Let's have the real, open, honest communication," and say, "Why is that funny?" and answer that. And argue even. I love argument.

Anderson: It's a very interesting remark, and it brought to mind something that we haven't talked about yet. We talk a little bit about other things that you've seen that you value or are interesting, and we'll circle back to that in a couple of minutes. I wonder if you know the Thames Television "World at War" television series produced in Britain. It's a history, I believe substantially directed and written by Jeremy Isaacs. It's a documentary series on the Second World War. And very, very well done. As a historian I find that the history held up well over the decades. It's still very strong. There's a really quite incredible interview with a veteran, an American veteran of Okinawa in that story, who tells the story of being in a miserable fighting position. Of course the campaign was one of the worst of the Pacific War. His unit was in terrible, terrible shape, and men were absolutely on the edge. And a Japanese infiltrator, a suicide bomber, approached the position, and was shot by a Century before he could detonate the device, but it blew up as he was shot. And this Japanese soldier's buttocks flew into the trench, landed in an American's lap, and he looked down at himself and said, "Oh, my god, am I hit that badly?" And the veteran who's telling this story in this documentary said, "And we all burst out laughing."

Wolfert: (Laughs) Yeah, yeah.

Anderson: It was an absolutely grotesque and horrifying experience, and yet they received it as hilarious in that circumstance.

Wolfert: Yeah. Yes.

Anderson: And I imagine you, in these things that people are reluctant to talk about outside of your workshops, that's exactly the sort of thing that they're--the combat veterans are getting at. Things where a civilian simply could not understand the emotional range that's established by these--

Wolfert: Yes, emotional--what a great phrase. Yes, the emotional range of that. Because--and again that's why Shakespeare, because sometimes people come in, and I was certainly like this--didn't have any vocabulary to share this stuff. But Shakespeare is that epic. He does share stuff that is that extreme and yet is human, you know, in a different sense, and--I sort of lost my train of thought, 'cause my brain went in twelve different directions as soon as you said emotional range, 'cause I wanted to talk about the voice in Alfred Wilson's experience, a similar experience to that. But yes, it--creating a room where we can share that kind of stuff and not be judged, just heard--that's what I'm really after is rooms like that. And then we start finding out how much more in

common we have. Because even though the play *Cry Havoc!* is as a military veteran I'm talking about this, I get people coming up to me from all different—who are nonveterans who come up with, they're talking about their traumas that I may not have even mentioned in the play and say, "I had this happen to me as a child," or, "I grew up in this environment, and yet it still speaks to me." Great, that's what I'm after, is just for you to get your conversation going, because Shakespeare's characters think it or feel it, and they say it. And we just don't have that. We don't have that. And I'm not suggesting we walk around like that everyday because I don't know what kind of culture that would be, but to have just such a clamp-down be-quiet culture is to me, is too extreme the other way. So at least for three hours a week once a week with Bedlam Outreach we give veterans the opportunity to think it or feel it and say it. And it's through practice. We get better and we get better, and starting with his language then bringing our own, and sharing stories like you just said like that. And yeah, I've heard so many stories like that, where they talk about it, and it might seem messed up to other people, but they're afraid to share it. And that's a phrase I've heard a lot: "God, I've never told this story before." In the room I'll hear that.

Anderson: Our society has become, in contrast to the post-Vietnam era, very, very deferential to members of the armed forces, perhaps excessively deferential or certainly excessively deferential to the institution when, in the wake of WWII, and you had fourteen million men running around who knew what the armed forces were all about, I think in many ways that was a better situation for citizenship. People had—they knew the institution from the inside and did not regard it with uncritical admiration that sometimes seems to be the case nowadays. What do you hear about remarks like "Thank you for your service" from your veterans?

Wolfert: Yeah, so, (laughs) I could talk about that forever. When I started doing this work, I was a big proponent of it because we weren't at war. So as we discussed, we were young as we watched the Vietnam veterans go through this. Then society, I would argue, changed. The American culture, our American population generally speaking, realized—that shame came up again. We realized we really treated these veterans badly, and I tend to thank the entirety of the Vietnam generation or that era, both civilians and veterans, for the way I was treated. I was treated so much better than they were because of the horrible conditions they went through. The protesting, whatnot. And then as a result we've been treating veterans, at least on the surface, much, much better. I don't see the care getting all that much better for the veterans, but at least—I was never spit on or called a baby killer. Well, I shouldn't say never, but at it wasn't the norm that it was—it sounds like it was for the Vietnam vets. So it has improved because of the discussion, but—as far as "thank you for your service", now most of the vets-- I've been corrected, and most of them hate it. What I'm hearing. Because I think it's become hollow, is the phrase that I'm hearing, is that "thank you for your service" has become hollow. I tend to use, as per advice from many, many post- 9/11 vets, "welcome home" or "welcome back". And I use that regardless of the era because the Vietnam veterans were never truly welcomed back, so when I see them or Korean War era veterans, welcome. Glad you're here. And that's why our class is free and open to veterans of all eras to come on in and just hang out with other vets and do Shakespeare, which sounds like--what? But they--

Anderson: I remember quite vividly, I put my ROTC uniform on on Thursdays and strode across the campus, you know, getting the, frequently, catcalls and jokes and so forth. People enjoyed giving us the business. Then one morning right after the Beirut bombing, all of the marines in my ROTC battalion went jogging, as we sometimes did, in boots and utilities across campus, and that had flipped a switch of some kind. People who saw us running through the campus called out to us, cheered us on. It sort of sobered

everybody up all of a sudden, and the kind of sarcastic nonsense was at an end. But no, it was very interesting, I think. People ask me about my military experience, is that was in many ways the most interesting thing about it, was to watch that pendulum swing back the other way. It was right there in that interval in which you and I were on active duty.

Wolfert: Yeah.

Anderson: Well, I want to make sure before we end up cutting to questions that we tie up a few loose ends, and one of the things I wanted to ask you was what you thought about other work, other than Shakespeare, the veteran experience. Whether there was other books, plays, novels, films, or music that really speak to you that you find helpful.

Wolfert: Yeah, there's a great deal. And thankfully there's a great many veterans and just nonveterans who are artists using that work, so the pressure's off. Because I am most passionate about Shakespeare. It just--I never tire of it. I love it so much, and I always get so much out of it and seeing other people work on it. So that I'm able to do that in part because there are so many other people using other work, whether it's using the Greek classics, which are even before Shakespeare. Bryan Doerries and Peter Meineck in New York in particular are both using the classics with veterans--because they are were veterans. The ancient Athenians who wrote those plays, Sophocles for example, was a veteran of the Battle of Marathon among others, a famous sea battle whose name I can't remember. But in any case there's the classics, which isn't contemporary but it's other work. Then there's so many things from WWI, there's so many poets that came out of WWI for some reason. Wilfred Owen is my favorite non-Shakespeare poet, who was a veteran of WWI, British. Alfred Wilson's work. He did voice work, which, because I've rambled on on too many other topics, didn't get to his work as a stretcher-bearer in WWI and how he used the voice to heal, and I borrow liberally from him to use that same premise. The--your own right here in Chicago John Di Fusco, who wrote *Tracers*.

Vietnam era veteran--veteran of the war in Vietnam--brought together other veterans from the war in Vietnam, used theater, told their stories, made the play *Tracers* from that experience that then became a critically acclaimed award winning play that still is done today. *Home Front* is another great one, another great play. Ah, dang it, "Tender Comrade". Billy Bragg, my favorite. Does it acapella. One of my favorite songs. It's basically a poem that's sung. Yeah there's so much. But I'm not the--I just--

Anderson: But you stick to Shakespeare.

Wolfert: I do. I really--what I try to do is learn who's doing other work, so if a vet comes to me and we're working on Shakespeare, and it's just not their thing, I'm always trying to expose them to other work, to say, "Well, if this doesn't work for you, does that? Or does his work or her work?" Do you know what I mean, to turn them on to some other stuff. Some people just want to write in contemporary.

Anderson: What did you think of the Eastwood film *American Sniper*?

Wolfert: I have to steal a phrase--I don't know if I can credit it--it's not my quote, but I liked it better than I thought I would, (laughs) because, to stay apolitical, I had so many preconceived notions going in and so many judgments and so many things that I was worried about. Because again, I talked about that binary. One of the binaries I absolutely abhor is hero, because then that automatically means there has to be a villain. And who's the hero and who's the villain? But theater and art operates in between the binary, hero and villain or go/no-go or friend or foe and all this. That's what I like to know is, I want to know the human. And I think there were--what I loved about that is it did show the human a bit more than I thought it would.

Anderson: Right. Particularly excellent and capable soldier--

Wolfert: Yeah

Anderson: --having exactly the same kind of trouble.

Wolfert: Human problems. And then showing his outlet was connecting with other veterans who had, as I would put it, maybe lost their humanity. Or reconnecting with their humanity in feeling lost. And that's really where I--I'm blessed to be part of a think-tank in New York that's called the PACH, Project for the Advancement of our Common Humanity. Really long name we just say--

Anderson: A minor project.

Wolfert: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Exactly, right. But it is because they use that term humanity, when I first was working with them I was like, "What the heck does that mean?" But ironic that here, a guy who has dedicated his last twenty years to Shakespeare, who is only trying to figure out what does it mean to be a human, I'm asking, "Well, what is humanity?" What is that, you what I mean, because it's such an abstract term. It's a bit like the word right there, honor. It can mean anything to anyone at any moment, positive or negative. And humanity is that way for me. But to connect to the human, and that's why for veterans to use Shakespeare, Shakespeare is all about what does it mean to be human. And as veterans we understand in the most extreme version how to disconnect to humanity. It's part of our--even if we only trained, a part of us had to disconnect from certain parts of our humanity or others' humanity in order to be successful. At least that's my opinion. And so to reconnect with that humanity again, theater and Shakespeare in particular is the perfect way to reconnect that, connect those two.

(Applause)

Clarke: Thank you to Stephan Wolfert and Dr. Truman Anderson for an outstanding discussion and to the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre for supporting this program. To learn more about the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, visit ChicagoShakes.com. To learn more about the Museum and Library visit in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org.

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(Theme music)

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(Theme music)

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