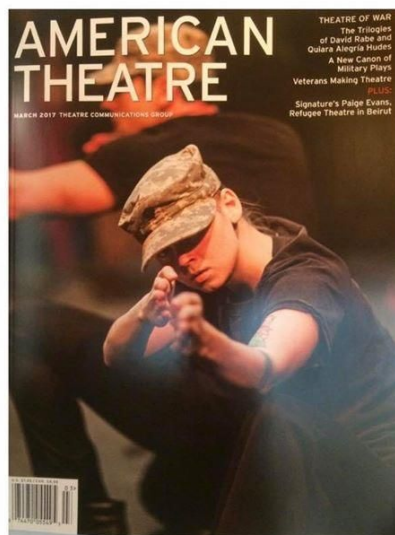


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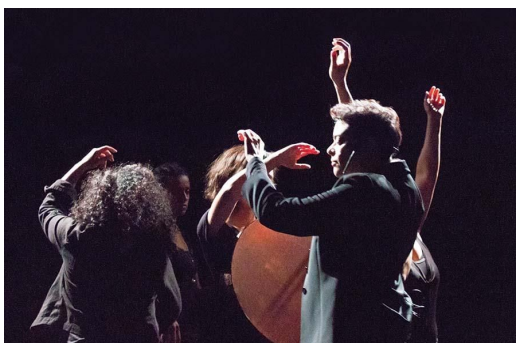
Bringing It All Back Home

How veterans who leave the theatre of war are finding expression in another kind of theatre.

BY SARAH HART

“No one would understand my story.”

It’s a refrain Andrea Assaf hears often as she works with U.S. military veterans, and it gives voice to a perception that only contributes to the challenges—psychological, physical, emotional—that complicate the reentry process. “The hardest thing coming out of service is to reintegrate to civilian life,” said Assaf, whose collective, [Art2Action](#), based in Tampa, Fla., has incorporated several arms of veteran outreach into its cultural organizing mission. “Veterans carry this feeling that no one can understand that experience.”



*Andrea Assaf in "Eleven Reflections on September" at La MaMa in New York City in 2015.
(Photo courtesy of La MaMa)*

According to an October 2013 white paper by Americans for the Arts (“Arts, Health and Well-Being across the Military Continuum”), one in three veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have experienced post-traumatic stress (PTS), traumatic brain injury (TBI), or a combination of the two. Fourteen percent meet the criteria for depression, although depression itself is not considered a combat-related injury. In 2012, 10 percent of America’s homeless were veterans.

The use of art therapy to combat the issues service members face upon returning home is on the rise, particularly as the traditional medical model has often fallen short. With its strong basis in role-playing, dialogue, and empathy, theatre fills an obvious crossover role as a therapeutic measure. And many artists and organizations are seeking ways beyond the support group to offer points of entry for veterans, active duty military personnel, and their families—and to broaden their own, and their audiences’, understanding of the military experience.

TCG’s [Blue Star Theatres initiative](#), launched in 2012 in partnership with Blue Star Families and with support from the MetLife Foundation, has helped 152 theatres build relationships with military personnel in their communities, through complimentary or discounted tickets, stronger communication, and other programming (the pilot [Veterans and Theatre Institute](#), led by artist-in-residence Maurice Decaul, will eventually define curricula for deeper engagement).

Other organizations have built strong frameworks for delivering theatre to military audiences, such as Bryan Doerries and Outside the Wire’s Theater of War, begun in 2008, which takes visceral readings of Sophocles’ *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* to military and civilian communities across the U.S., Europe, and Asia in order to foster discussion on the psychological trauma of war, and Marine-turned-actor Adam Driver’s [Arts in the Armed Forces](#), which presents contemporary plays to active duty military in U.S. installations at home and abroad. Veteran-specific performance training—like that offered by [Bedlam Theatre](#)’s Stephan Wolfert, himself an Army

vet—is yet another creative avenue.

But some theatre artists have defined their role as giving voice to veterans' own stories, and in doing so have tapped into the incredible power that storytelling holds in helping veterans reconnect with civilian life.

“My experience so far has been that these veterans are not feeling heard by their community,” said veteran April Fitzsimmons, artistic director of the [Veterans Writing and Performance Project](#) at the [Geffen Playhouse](#) in Los Angeles. “Not that they have a specific thing to say, but there’s a feeling of not being welcomed back into a population you feel separate from because of the experience of being military.”

Fitzsimmons knows a little about that, having served as an intelligence analyst in the Air Force herself, though during peacetime. “Not to generalize—not all vets feel sad and alone,” she continued, “but I did, and I didn’t have that dramatic of an experience. You’re programmed to be a certain way, think a certain way, do what you’re told—so when you’re asked to join a society that’s very, ‘Hey, man, whatever you want,’ it’s hard. Individual thinking is not conducive to wartime. But theatre is all about trusting your instincts.”

Fitzsimmons was initially skeptical when Geffen director of education and community engagement Jennifer Zakkai approached her about leading the program. “I was very interested in doing a veterans project, but hadn’t found an inspiring way to do a monologue night,” she recalled, citing her experience both as a performer and an audience member. For years, she said, “People were really trying to incite conversation, and monologue nights were one way to do that. But vets were all telling their worst stories,” recounting their most harrowing experiences and darkest thoughts. The result: “Not only were the veterans disempowered and exhausted by that kind of storytelling, so was the audience. There was a hopeless feeling leaving those performances: ‘What a terrible predicament, there’s no way to help.’”

Zakkai convinced Fitzsimmons to come on board anyway, and the two conceptualized what the program would be: a 14-week workshop for veterans of any stripe culminating in an evening of curated storytelling, somewhat akin to the storytelling collective the Moth, titled *Everyday Heroes* and performed on the Geffen’s mainstage. “I felt like if we were going to do this, we needed to put it on the mainstage and have vets feel this is the best house in this theatre, and this is the best show for you,” said Fitzsimmons.

Finding humor in the story-mining process is also key, she said. “In the military experience, humor is what got you through. My goal is to get them back in their bodies, get that sense of playfulness restored.” The program’s second round concluded this past December, and now the Geffen is looking forward to a third season of the project.

For her part, Fitzsimmons—who also writes for NBC’s *Chicago Justice*—honed her

skills through the Writers Guild Foundation’s Veterans Writing Project. Numerous other veteran-specific writers groups and workshops have provided connections for theatre artists looking to collaborate with vets, including those offered by the Writers Guild Initiative (in partnership with Wounded Warrior Project); nonprofits like the Philadelphia-based Warrior Writers and the Washington, D.C.-based Veterans Writing Project; and programs at New York, Columbia, Fordham, and Syracuse Universities.



The cast of the Veterans Writing and Performance Project at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles.

Today’s smaller military force means that service members tend to see multiple deployments, with less time at home in between—which takes a toll on them and their families and further isolates them from civilian life. Our post-draft, all-volunteer, professional military employs less than 1 percent of the population, effectively cementing the understanding gap.

“Essentially, we have a tiny military now, but they’re still undertaking massive wars,” said Jonathan Wei, who founded the Austin-based [the Telling Project](#) in 2008. “There’s very little on-the-street understanding or integration into communities about what that means.” Wei founded the Telling Project after reaching the limits of his own knowledge while working with a group of veterans in Portland, Ore., in 2005. “Their patience with the depth of my own ignorance,” as he put it, became the catalyst for the Telling Project, which uses person-to-person contact to deepen understanding of the military experience throughout a community.

Wei and his small team travel to cities across the country to interview veterans, usually at the invitation of a producing partner within that community. The veterans’ stories are transcribed and shaped into scripts, with the vets collaborating on the final shape, then rehearsed and performed by the vets themselves, sometimes with direction by someone in the community and sometimes by the Telling Project team (which includes co-creator Max Rayneard). “We’ve performed everywhere from Lincoln Center to upstairs at the Veteran Memorial Hall in Des Moines,” said Wei. “It’s really gratifying to see folks step forward and bring their stories to their

community—and then the community embrace these folks for just being human, instead of being whatever ideas or stereotypes they may have had about military people.”

This month the Telling Project is in residence at Minneapolis’s [Guthrie Theater](#) with *She Went to War*, stories from female veterans who all served in combat positions, even before the Combat Exclusion Policy was lifted in 2013.

“We’re debunking the myth of that policy,” noted Wei, “and also individualizing that experience.” The piece is intended to tour—with its original actor-veterans—and could even potentially find life as a stand-alone script. “Because it’s more topical, and there’s a certain kind of social, political angle, we want to see if they’re willing to release it, and add to the conversation in a broader way,” said Wei. “With other productions, there’s no question on our part, we shouldn’t let the script go to somebody else.” More traditional Telling Project productions will go up this year in Naples, Fla. (April 29-May 4, in collaboration with the Florida Humanities Council), Arizona, New Jersey, and Virginia.

Fay Simpson launched the Veterans Project within her New York City-based Impact Theatre in 2012 as a way of applying Behavior Change Process, a method of using theatre for social change championed by Mgunga Mwa Mnyenyelwa of Parapanda Theatre Lab in Tanzania. (Simpson, along with co-facilitator Gamal Palmer, took graduate students from Yale Drama and Divinity Schools to Tanzania in 2012 and ’13 to study with Mgunga.) “I thought I would start with veterans, then move to another topic—use the process to go into domestic violence or eating disorders or poverty,” she recalled. “But I can’t seem to move on, because people love this piece. Vets have changed in front of my eyes.” Simpson’s husband was an Israeli veteran who died of alcohol abuse, so she comes to the subject with a keen sense of the struggles faced.

Initially six Impact Theatre actors, trained in Simpson’s Lucid Body technique, interviewed veterans for a verbatim script, *Homecoming*, which they performed. But Simpson knew she wanted to involve the veterans more in the process itself. She created a company of four actors and three veterans to make *Leaving Theatre* (a military term for discharge); in it, the non-veteran actors play the military roles, while the veterans play civilians. As part of the Behavior Change Process, the action of the 20-minute piece is frozen at a strategic point and Simpson leads a 40-minute dialogue with the audience.

“A character is being interviewed by people in the audience—you have civilians asking questions,” she said. “A vet who was playing a civilian in the play is answering from new knowledge and awareness of that civilian’s confusion.” At curtain call, each performer identifies as a civilian or a veteran, stating the number of years served. “Audiences are shocked. They think the actors were vets and the vets were actors.”

The impact goes inward as well. “It’s a process of teaching each other, which is very healing,” Simpson said. “Actors are trained to take on the given circumstances of someone else. For an actor to say, ‘How do you hold this rifle? How do you march? How do you handle a wounded soldier?’ and for veterans to give us those lessons—the expertise that they have is suddenly being used. Actors are taking in that information and veterans are seeing actors do that. I find it extraordinarily helpful for the healing process of veterans.”



Fay Simpson during a presentation of the Veterans Project’s “Leaving Theatre” at SUNY New Paltz in 2015. (Photo by John Oles)

Similarly, Fitzsimmons noted that “veterans have a great sense of contribution. Why else would you volunteer to do this, to set aside part of your life to be of service to country? When vets come back they’re not sure how to help any more. If they learn that just by telling a story they can bring a tear or moment of reflection—that’s very rewarding.” Some of the veteran participants across all of these projects have gone on to pursue theatre as a vocation.

Writer/performer/director Assaf was developing her *Eleven Reflections on September* in 2011 at [Pangea World Theater](#)’s Alternate Visions in Minneapolis, in collaboration with Iraq Veterans Against the War, when she connected with playwright Linda Parris-Bailey. Parris-Bailey was seeking a director for *Speed Killed My Cousin*, about an African-American Iraq veteran wrestling with her reintegration as well as a generational conflict with her father and the ghost of his cousin, both veterans of the Vietnam War. The synergy between the two wasn’t merely artistic: Parris-Bailey’s Knoxville, Tenn.-based ensemble, [the Carpetbag Theatre](#), has been rooted in community storytelling since its founding in 1969; Assaf, through Art2Action, combines her work as an artist and presenter with strong

community-embedded programming.

Parris-Bailey had worked closely with several Knoxville veterans through Carpetbag's story circle process while writing her script, but, she noted, "as we developed the piece, we knew our intention went beyond writing and presenting a play." The two companies received an Alternate ROOTS "Partners in Action" grant to develop a model for veteran storytelling and community exchange (Creative Arts Reintegration, or CAR) that could tour alongside the play. Art2Action's base in Tampa—home to Central Command, the hub for U.S. security interests throughout the Middle East and Central Asia—was a fertile ground for partnership, with a huge community of both veterans and active military. Assaf and Parris-Bailey connected with Rachel Brink, director of the Psychosocial Recovery and Rehabilitation Center (PRRC) at the Tampa V.A. Hospital, who was excited to bring in professional theatre artists to expand existing arts-therapy programming. Those workshops—which have continued in a weekly format for the past three years—formed the basis for the CAR process.

"The model we're interested in at Art2Action and Carpetbag is one in which professional artists partner with service providers," explained Assaf. "That's different than a hospital that hires arts therapists. We're not therapists. We're rooted in community-based practice that is part of our art-making. We believe very strongly in the power of partnerships between the medical and arts fields."

"We have a longstanding history of community engagement and development, so some of the process is our own," said Parris-Bailey. "But some things we learned along the way. We worked with people who were skilled in trauma work and we began to understand a lot more about how to engage."

She credits the company's experience partnering with Doerries's Theater of War for Carpetbag's commitment to creating the right environment for veteran engagement. "Our intent is not to trigger or do harm. We always begin [the show] by sharing with the audience that there is no intermission, but they can take a break or get up and leave. We have people there for them if they need to talk. We are trying to talk about the reality of war, because it doesn't seem to be talked about, particularly with young people, and particularly young African-American people, who are increasingly considering what their options are."

Art2Action also organizes a monthly open mic night for veterans, begun when Assaf realized some vets might need a more neutral space than the V.A. could provide. "I learned that there are actual restrictions in a V.A. facility, or any military branch—veterans are instructed to not talk about politics," Assaf marvelled. "It's hard for them to express how they feel about their military experience. Even if there is no censorship, there's a fear that they might lose services if they do or say the wrong thing." The open mics—currently hosted at the coffee house Tre Amici @ the Bunker—are focused on veterans but are open to anyone in the community, as well

as guest artists Art2Action brings to Tampa, which opens up further opportunity to bridge cultures. “When someone who is a civilian says to a vet, ‘I related to your piece,’ it’s a big a-ha moment for them,” said Assaf.

As these organizations—and many others—continue to make inroads within the military community and figure out the best formats for bringing veterans into their work, many seek to share experiences with one another.

“We’re trying not to double our efforts, but to see where we can all coordinate and build together,” said Assaf, who played a key role in bringing the fourth National Summit of the National Initiative for Arts & Health in the Military, co-hosted by Americans for the Arts, Art2Action, and the University of South Florida, to Tampa last month. Art2Action curated the concurrent R&R Arts Festival: From Recovery to Regeneration, the first time original work by, for, and about veterans has been performed parallel to the National Summit. “Veterans could be in conversation with researchers, policymakers, and the art works,” described Assaf.

This month, March 10-12, New England Foundation for the Arts, in partnership with ArtsEmerson, HowlRound, and the Foundation for Art and Healing, will host [Art in the Service of Understanding: New Perspectives from Artists and the Military Community](#) in Boston. Impetus for the convening came, according to NEFA deputy director Jane Preston, when the foundation saw that it had funded five touring projects over the past five years involving veterans, including *Speed Killed My Cousin*. With additional proposals coming in, the foundation saw a chance to share the conversation and identify best practices.

“How do you build a common language?” Preston asked, pointing to questions she hopes the event will probe. “It’s almost a translation issue. What have artists and military leaders found useful? What needs to be incorporated into the creation of the work in order to develop that short term, deep relationship with audience? Arts presenters don’t necessarily have a large contingent of military or veteran audience members, but here’s an opportunity to build that audience. How do they build more lasting relationships, even if there isn’t a consistent flow of projects?” HowlRound TV will provide live streaming of the event.

Funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Art2Action and Carpetbag are currently partnering with medical researchers from the V.A. and the University of South Florida to create a pilot study on the impact of the arts on veteran reintegration, with the aim of releasing their findings this fall. “We’re hoping this groundbreaking pilot can lay the foundation for deeper and more longitudinal understanding,” said Assaf. “With two teams of researchers, we can have multiple points of view. The USF psych team has a more clinical, quantitative approach, while the V.A. team—who are medical anthropologists—have a qualitative approach.”

“The Marines have a mantra,” Fitzsimmons offered. “‘Improvise, adapt, overcome.’ I can’t help but think how this applies to the theatrical process.”

Sarah Hart is a former managing editor of this magazine. She lives in Asheville, N.C. ■