
Out of military turmoil, 'Cry Havoc' delivers visceral poetry

By **Wei-Huan Chen** | June 9, 2017

0



Photo: Ashley Garrett

IMAGE 1 OF 2

Stephan Wolfert, star and writer of "Cry Havoc," being staged at 4th Wall Theatre Company.

He's an utter mess, the man splayed in the center of the floor.

Sweat darkens his shirt. His hair and eyes point in all directions. His motions suggest he is picking up a shotgun and pointing the barrel to the bottom of his chin, and then to his temple, then back to his chin again. How nerve-wracking to see life hinging on such frantic energy. We cannot resist the urge to leap toward him and hug him, yet we sit transfixed. His body trembles as he sips air from the room, then hisses it out in short gasps. He is about to do it.

But instead of violence, poetry arrives. The man speaks words that I've heard countless times, studied for years and yet only now understand with true clarity: "To be or not to be, that is the question"

I've never seen a performance that so viscerally connects the famous lines in Shakespeare with the idea of personal trauma. Stephan Wolfert's "Cry Havoc!," being staged now by the 4th Wall Theatre Company, is billed as a one-man show about PTSD viewed through the lens of war plays like "Hamlet," "Henry V" and "Richard III," but here's the rub: Most one-man shows and plays that try to connect literature with "issues" fail. They are almost always better in concept than in practice. Wolfert's show is intriguing in concept and exhilarating in practice. Developed over the course of a lifetime, this autobiographical piece is an emotional, intellectual and political wallop.

Wolfert tells us his story: He grew up in an abusive, alcoholic family and spent part of high school deformed due to a spine injury. To escape that world, he joined the military. Being a soldier trained to kill, he explained, meant getting "wired" for war. But he was never "unwired" for war, and found himself suffering from flashbacks, sleeping problems, agitation and an increasing reliance on alcohol.

During a training regiment, he saw his friend shot in the head due to friendly fire. He could never forget that moment, nor that image, and that nightmare returned to him often, just as that scene returns to us in the show again and again. Wolfert decided to run away from everything, and so he went AWOL, choosing to stowaway on trains in the American West in search of his new self. He landed one day

MORE INFORMATION

'Cry Havoc'

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday, 7:30 p.m. Thursday and Friday, through June 18

Where: Studio 101, 1824 Spring St.

Tickets: \$23-\$49, \$10 for veterans; 832-786-1849, 4thwalltheatreco.com.

at a performance of "Richard III" in a small town that shook him to his core.

Wolfert quit the military and became an actor after hearing Shakespeare's characters, many of them veterans, speak about post-war trauma in ways he'd never heard expressed. He dedicated much of his craft to using theater as a way to sort out the psychological traumas of combat, and his one-man show, "Cry Havoc!," whose title borrows from a monologue in "Julius Caesar," is the one-hour incarnation of that exploration.

The show begins with an anecdote, then flits to other memories with the abruptness of a montage. For a few minutes you might think this is just another solipsistic performance of ego and anxiety - a therapy session parading as entertainment - but then the show's true ambition leaps out at you.

All of the sudden, with the rhythm of a fireworks finale - it builds and explodes and builds and explodes - we realize the show is also about history, drama, justice and mental health. He tells the tragic tale of Henry Johnson, the World War I hero whose acts of selflessness and superhuman courage made him a legend among the French, yet was treated like dirt when he returned home to the U.S. He speaks of one in three women in the U.S. military being raped, often by a commanding officer. He tells us that, on average, two American veterans will have taken their lives in the time it takes to see "Cry Havoc!" The show is about one man's search for peace of mind, but it is also, without preaching, about the failure of a society to give its veterans the dignity, resources and psychological "unwiring" they need. The piece is reflective, but it is also urgent.

Wolfert's storytelling style contains the manic verbosity of George Carlin, the caustic clarity of David Sedaris and the chaotic introspection of Sarah Kane, though his closest artistic cousin is

TRANSLATOR

To read this article in one of Houston's most-spoken languages, click on the button below.

Select Language ▼

LIFESTYLE



Out of military turmoil, 'Cry Havoc' delivers visceral poetry

Looking back: June 11

Birthdays: June 11

Jokes on us: June 11

Cross-dresser schemes behind wife's back

Spalding Gray, whose sentences could pour worlds into existence.

Yet Wolfert is also a dancer and a mime, whose evocations of the battlefield - with sounds from his mouth, gestures with his hands and contortions of his body - are so primal they even make us imagine the smell of a helicopter's fuel as it descends from a night sky.

The show is presented as nonfiction, so I take Wolfert at his word when he describes the ways he struggled with himself in his post-military life. Later in life, Wolfert found a woman named Dawn who calmed him during his night terrors and rescued him from choosing to "shuffle off this mortal coil." He married her. But he reminds us that not every troubled veteran is so lucky to find his Dawn, that people who have a close relationship with a veteran make up 41 percent of the population.

"Tell me, sweet lord, what is it that takes from thee thy stomach, pleasure, and thy golden sleep?," Wolfert says in a scene about how family members and spouses struggle to speak to their veterans after they return home. The line is spoken by Lady Percy to her husband in "Henry IV," but Wolfert shows that the line is in fact universal. The traumas of war have been a topic of artistic exploration since ancient times, and theater has long been seen as both medicine and the definitive realm for conversations about war and trauma.

Wolfert cautions that we have forgotten these facts in modern days, and so we are left with veterans who aren't equipped to answer the question Lady Percy asks: "Why dost thou bend thine eyes upon the earth and start so often when thou sit'st alone?"

Faced with such a conundrum, you might be tempted to ask "what can we do?" But the problem is that the question "what can we do?" often masks its true intention, which is to ask "what I can do to feel better?"

The show itself doesn't offer that catharsis because to do so would be to diminish its plea against complacency. It dares to contain both confusion and clarity, both brutality and grace. It demands contemplation long after its end. So if you walk out feeling like you're lathered in thick emotion, wait a while before reaching for the washcloth. Let it stay, let it stick. "Cry Havoc!" wants to. It's the best kind of theater.

Wei-Huan Chen



Theater Critic +
Classical/Opera Writer

HEARST *newspapers*

© 2017 Hearst Newspapers, LLC.