

In "Cry Havoc," Stephan Wolfert Recounts His Transition From Soldier to Actor

BY NATE BETHEA

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Stephan Wolfert balances aggression and passivity in *Cry Havoc!*

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It's a Monday night at a studio near Penn Station, and I've somehow found myself performing Shakespeare's *Othello*. I've come as a journalist to Stephan Wolfert's acting workshop for military veterans, but I'm a veteran myself – which means I'm not exempt from participation. Getting drafted into a surprise performance like this would usually be my worst nightmare, but there's an invigorating energy in the room, punctuated by Wolfert's exhortations that we "dare to suck." I'm not an actor, but I act.

I watch Kevin Knapp, a former Green Beret with 28 years of service, perform an excerpt from Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Kevin has a cervical spine injury that causes him to suffer painful spasms; he works through them to deliver his monologue. Most every week, Knapp drives up from Nokesville, Virginia, to receive physical therapy in New York. While he's here, he attends Wolfert's workshop. I used to teach college English at CUNY, and you can take it from me: Students don't show up to learn Shakespeare after sunset unless they really want to be there.

"It's a room full of brothers and sisters, and we draw from each other in our military experience and our acting experience," Knapp says. "It helps me be a better person, and it's connecting me with people I now consider family."

Wolfert has taught his free acting workshop for veterans since 2013, which he'll continue doing during the running of his new one-man stage show, *Cry Havoc!*, now at the New Ohio Theatre. It links veterans, Shakespeare, and Wolfert's autobiography. The self-described "sensitive little boy who wanted to be a dancer" and child of "an alcoholic that Eugene O'Neill would have been proud of" left school at the University of Wisconsin–La Crosse and enlisted in the Army: first the Minnesota National Guard, then active duty. He became an infantry officer, watched a friend die in a training accident, went AWOL, and returned to resign his commission after a theatrical epiphany: He saw a performance of Shakespeare in Whitefish, Montana, in 1991, and it resonated with him specifically because of how it addressed combat veterans.

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"Shakespeare was surrounded by veterans," Wolfert tells me at a Brooklyn restaurant after the workshop. "The people who were fighting wars in his days were 70 percent working class. It was the same thing. [In *Henry IV*], Lady Percy's speech to her husband, Hotspur – he's a combat vet, just came back from combat and is leaving again in the morning – is the best description of post-traumatic stress in the English language. It's so good that Jonathan Shay, the psychologist who wrote *Achilles in Vietnam*, takes lines of Shakespeare's verse from

her speech and next to them lists symptoms from the diagnostic manual. Like, 'why are you thus alone?' – isolation. 'Why hast thou lost the fresh blood of thy cheeks?' – paleness. It just lists it, and that's how good he is."

With the epiphany of that connection, Wolfert decided to make acting his life's work, and to make a stage play about his own life. It would be vulnerable and frank, covering both the trauma he experienced in the military and before it, with just one small hitch: People would have to want to see it.

That isn't meant as a glib statement. Like Wolfert, I was a kid from the Midwest who became an Army infantry officer. I was deployed once to Afghanistan, and have spent the years since trying to coax creative work from the experience. It's not easy, particularly not when trying to pare a detailed personal story down to the essentials. What Wolfert has achieved in *Cry Havoc!* is unique – something accessible and engaging to spectators whether they're veterans or not. It's a war story, but an unconventional and brutally honest one, with heavy emphasis on the latter.

As such, there are far more laughs than you might expect. When Wolfert describes his first encounters with drill sergeants at Army basic training, he's the drill sergeant and the private, the victim and the aggressor, alternately standing at attention and getting a hand pointed in his face – and it's truly funny. Wolfert's ability to read the audience and feed their desire to laugh seems like a strong suit – so strong, it turns out, that the director, Eric Tucker, told him to tamp it down.

"He's naturally a funny guy," Tucker says. "It feels good to make people laugh, and for some performers it's hard to pass that up. But if he says it, and lets the audience have it, the laughter would make people deflect what they're feeling."

That pendulum-swing between laughter and pathos reaches its climax toward the end of the show, when Wolfert relates a story of catering a birthday party full of spoiled children in Los Angeles. When one girl struck him in the face with a piece of cake, his initial instinct was to "crush her skull." Humiliated by his own reaction, he fled home and put a shotgun to his head. It would be plenty horrifying if this were a fictional character, but it's more distressing to hear the performer who's been making you laugh for the past hour tell you how close he came to ending his own life, or see him pantomiming holding the trigger.

Likewise, when Wolfert describes his experience with paralysis as a high school wrestler, or the aftermath of his friend's fatal training accident, or that dark moment with the gun, there's an intensity that sears. Addressing the specter of veteran suicides, Wolfert is so overcome with emotion that he has to pause to catch his breath. And yet the show ends on an optimistic note, suggesting that in

the path he's taken toward dialogue and revelation there's an opportunity for something approaching peace.

Watching *Cry Havoc!*, I was reminded of something Francis Ford Coppola said to describe the making of *Apocalypse Now*: "You use a word like 'self-purgation' and 'epiphany,' they think you're either a religious weirdo or a college professor. But those are the words for the process. This transmutation, this renaissance, this rebirth, which is the basis for all life."

Maybe it's a bit too much. Maybe one man's self-purgation is another's oversharing. What I know is: *Cry Havoc!* is a veteran-themed performance that I would recommend to veterans and civilian friends alike.

Cry Havoc!

New Ohio Theater

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