

Joining Forces

When theatre artists and military personnel come together, assumptions on both sides are transformed

BY KJ SANCHEZ

Joseph Harrell in *ReEntry*, at CENTERSTAGE in Baltimore.

RICHARD ANDERSON

THIS PAST WINTER, I WAS INVITED BY PRODUCER Mark Russell to participate in a “speed-dating” event for presenters attending the Under the Radar festival in New York City. I was there to talk about *ReEntry*, a play I directed and co-wrote (with Emily Ackerman) as a commission for Red Bank, N.J.’s Two River Theater Company in 2008. *ReEntry* is based on interviews with U.S. Marines Corps members returning from deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. In the past three years it has been produced at Two River as well as Urban Stages in New York and at Baltimore’s CENTERSTAGE. My company, American Records, has also been hired by the military to present the play at national military conferences, Marine Corps bases and, most recently, the Armed Forces Public Health Conference, where it was performed for members of all branches of the military.

As one of six companies participating in New England Foundation for the Arts’s National Theater Pilot, American Records is gearing up to tour *ReEntry*—hence the invitation to the speed-dating event. As I sat down at my first table of presenters, someone, having just read the description of the play, said to me, “Oh! You’re the military brat!” At first I didn’t even know what he was talking about, but then it dawned on me, and I just laughed. These last three years have taken me on quite a journey: from downtown theatre gal—who grew up in avant-garde dance-theatre, attends every peace rally she can and is as “lefty” as they come—to someone who could now be seen as a military brat.

Even though *ReEntry*’s co-author Emily has two brothers who are marines and have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, and I had five brothers who served during the Vietnam War, neither of us would ever describe ourselves as coming from a “military family.” Until we began writing this play, we didn’t have a clue as to what our brothers did in their military roles. “I think of military families as people who grew up with it in their childhoods—my brothers joined when we were already adults, so it was a different thing,” as Emily put it. “Having to learn all about an at times insular community with its own culture and traditions was overwhelming at first. I had a lot of misconceptions. I had no idea how to be supportive, or even whether I wanted to be. It took a lot of time to understand just what my brothers were doing, why they were doing it, and how important it was to them. And that’s still continuing.”

MY OWN TRANSFORMATION BEGAN WHILE I WAS an artist in residence at the University of Washington. One day Jon Jory (the former artistic director of Actors Theatre of Louisville, who is on faculty there) came up to me and said, “KJ, someone has to start interviewing all these people coming back from war.” Soon after that I began working at Two River and decided, with then artistic director Aaron Posner, that I should pursue the returning veterans idea. Emily and I had worked together on other interview-based plays (we’re both associate artists with the Civilians, a New York City-based



MICHAEL PORTANTIERE

ReEntry co-creators Sanchez and Ackerman.

documentary theatre company), and I knew of her brothers' service, so I asked her to partner with me.

Creating a play based on interviews is a viral process: You gain one person's trust, and they introduce you to two of their friends, and so on. We traveled quite a bit, going wherever a lead took us. In California, where Emily's brothers were stationed, we began interviewing them and their buddies. We crashed conferences where we knew we'd meet high-ranking officers—at one, we cornered an unsuspecting colonel, delivered a passionate pitch and solicited an interview. We always got the same response: a polite smile and a clear look of disbelief and mistrust. We were often held at arm's length. Later, when we earned some credibility, we found out why: Most military personnel saw us as "Hollywood," and many feel that war-fighters are often grossly misrepresented by Hollywood—either via the figure of the emotionally damaged, distraught and abusive vet, or the "lone wolf," fighting off the bad guys single-handedly. Nearly all of the active-duty service members we interviewed, to greater or lesser degrees, saw themselves as quiet professionals in a field focused on teamwork, and were wary of talking to artists.

But eventually we gained their trust. Certainly, being sisters of combat veterans helped. And so did a set of rules we created that became essential:

- No politics. Right off the bat, we told all our subjects that this play was not about the politics of the war, but rather about what it's like to come home. This was a relief to many, since most defined themselves as apolitical, explaining to us that they must

be able to serve as "the arm of the people," no matter who is commander-in-chief.

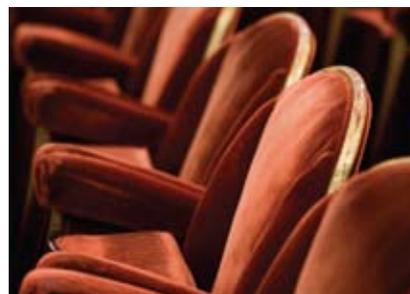
- Don't say things like, "I don't support the war, but I support the troops." I struggled with this for a long time, but I finally understood why: If someone wanted to start a relationship with me and one of their first comments was, "I think theatre is irrelevant and a waste of time, but I think it's neat that you're a theatre director," that would certainly *not* encourage me to welcome them into my home and my life.

- Take the time to learn a little of their language and a few key rules. Don't call a sailor or a marine a soldier (that's army) or if you're talking to someone enlisted, i.e., not an officer, don't call them *sir* or *ma'am*, call them by their rank: staff sergeant or sergeant major. It took a little study, but one afternoon of research proved invaluable in establishing trust and respect.

- Thanking someone for their service may not be as welcome as you might think—many shared with us their conflicted feelings about that sentiment. Responses ranged from benign—as a female army officer told me, "I guess I feel guilty when people thank

me, since I didn't see the worst"—to more emotional. A staff sergeant who was severely injured in an IED attack responded: "Thank you for what? For getting blown up? For being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Or for doing what you wouldn't go and do? Whatever, just buy me a beer and we'll call it even." (I break this rule all the time; I still thank them for their service. I just make sure that I know something about them as people before I thank the uniform.)

- America does not have a warrior culture. If you get this, and let them know that you get this, it will be one of the most important keys to opening gates to this community. As a commanding officer told a room full of marine parents at a conference we attended: "Believing America possesses a warrior culture reflects more wishful thinking than reality. Much has been said about Americans being desensitized to violence, via Hollywood and video games. But there is no correlation between watching two-dimensional, third-party violence and having the faculties to face and kill an armed opponent, while doing so inside the intensity of fear for one's own life. Our alleged comfort with interpersonal



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violence is an illusion.” Hearing this coming from an infantry commander helped me understand the disconnect between my assumptions and his reality.

AS EMILY AND I STARTED TO PIECE together the play, we created a military advisory committee. (We never used the word “partnership”; this was a tip from a mentor of mine, Bryan Doerries, founder of Theater of War, which has performed more than 100 staged readings of Sophocles’ *Ajax* for military audiences [see page 52]. As Bryan alerted me, it is illegal for the military to formally “partner” with anything or anyone, and that word can end a discussion. Better terminology: “invite to participate,” “work together,” “share experiences.”) Our advisory group read each draft of the play and offered feedback. We were very clear about what we wanted from them—we weren’t interested in the play becoming a mouthpiece for anyone’s agenda; rather, we needed them to tell us what voices were missing, and then provide access.

Much to my surprise, all but one of our advisors fully supported our autonomy and never hinted at rewrites. The one advisor who



COURTESY OF K.J. SANCHEZ

A performance of *ReEntry* in the chapel at USMC Recruit Depot, Parris Island, in South Carolina.

wanted rewrites, a retired gunnery sergeant, abruptly left the project after reading our second draft. He feared that the play—which, amid many smaller storylines, follows two brothers dealing with combat flashbacks and thoughts of suicide—would give the Marine Corps a black eye.

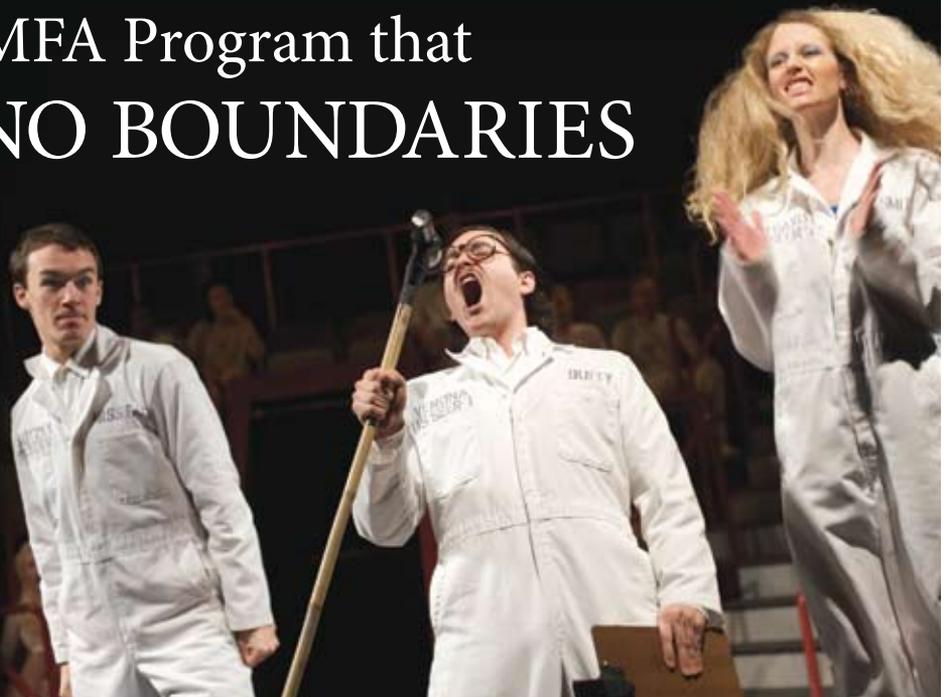
We worried about this, too. We felt the weight, the worry of hurting the people who

trusted us. The real test came in May 2010, when we performed *ReEntry* at the Navy Combat Operational Stress Control annual conference in San Diego. In attendance were hundreds of military leaders, support organizations and families. Sitting in the front row was Major General T.S. Jones (retired), who is a leader in issues facing wounded warriors. Right before the performance, I

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looked around the ballroom and thought, “What have we gotten ourselves into?” The actors—Joseph Harrell, Sameerah Luqmaan-Harris, Bobby Moreno, PJ Sosko and Sheila Tapia, who’ve been with the show since its inception—were about to portray marines for a room full of battle-hardened marines and sailors.

After the performance the first to speak was General Jones, whose support and positive feedback bowled us over. Jones said he thought the play could serve a role in healing and resilience. Word travels fast in the military community, and after the COSC performance, bases and military organizations began calling about booking the play.

After every one of these military performances, something remarkable happens: In front of each actor is a line of servicemen and servicewomen waiting to talk to them, to tell them their own stories. This happens every time, even when the person wanting to talk may not have liked the play. We recently performed at USMC Recruit Depot, Parris Island, in South Carolina. The performance took place in the base’s chapel on the altar—which, you can imagine, made us all a little nervous. There were about 750 marines in attendance, all in uniform, and most with multiple combat deployments under their belts. After the performance, a drill instructor wanted to talk to actor PJ Sosko. I caught only the first part of the exchange before I was pulled away by another marine who wanted to talk. Over half an hour later, I found PJ and the DI still huddled together. The DI was telling PJ things he’d never told anyone. Both had tears in their eyes.

AFTER OUR PERFORMANCE AT THE Marine Corps base in Quantico, Va., the command sergeant major said to the audience, “Now, the character John, he has some hard times and he talks about going ‘straight to see the wizard.’ Well, I want all the wizards here today to stand.” All the mental-health workers, psychiatrists and chaplains stood, at which point the sergeant major encouraged his men and women to go “straight to see the wizard—we won’t think any less of you.” In the historically tough-as-nails, “suck it up” military culture, to de-stigmatize seeking help is a huge shift in leadership—a far cry from what my brothers experienced coming back from Vietnam—and it amazed me.

I’ve also been amazed by how willing military leadership has been to address mistakes and failings. For example, several

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characters in *ReEntry* talk in fairly disparaging tones about therapy and treatment, and one of the main characters goes into great detail about how he thinks they’re treating wounded veterans “all wrong.” He goes so far as to say, “Bethesda’s ridiculous; it’s about everything *but* fixing these guys.” And yet Walter Reed and Bethesda Medical Centers have hired us to perform at their hospitals this summer. After a recent performance, I asked a psychiatrist from Walter Reed how he felt hearing these things and his reply was, “This is how they feel, and we need to hear it.”

The final step now for *ReEntry* is to

bring these military audiences and civilian audiences together under one roof, to hear these stories together. Our tour will begin with Round House Theater in Bethesda, Md., this October, and Kentucky’s Actors Theatre of Louisville in November and December.

It’s difficult to convey to what degree this project has changed me: I see military service in a whole new light; I know a little bit more about my own family; I’ve adopted some of the Marine Corps values of rigor and discipline into all of my work; and, to be completely honest, I’ve fallen in love with national service. Now when I encounter someone in uniform, if I want to strike up a conversation, the easiest way to do so is to talk about what we have in common: national service. It was my Marine Corps friends who helped me see that what I do—being a theatre artist—is in fact a kind of service to my nation. ☑

KJ Sanchez is the CEO and founder of American Records, a theatre company devoted to making work that chronicles our time and serves as a bridge between people.

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