

## **Bedlam Outreach**

By J.M. Meyer, Mission Continues Fellow, Bedlam

*(This post is a part of series highlighting the work of recipients of TCG's Blue Star Theatres grant program. Bedlam is a recipient of Blue Star Theatres grant funding to support Bedlam Outreach's free Monday night classes for veterans.)*

At [Bedlam Outreach's free Monday night classes](#), we study Shakespeare's texts, explore play and performance, and undertake writing exercises to help veterans discover how their politically involved and sometimes violent lives resonate with Shakespeare's plays. We help veterans discover what they learned about humanity from their military experience. And with Shakespeare's help, we also help veterans explore how their experience resonates within the broader Western culture that sent them to war. We have found that military veterans sometimes feel more at home in Shakespeare's tragedies and history plays than they do in 21st century New York.

I am myself a [military veteran and a theatre artist](#). I first came to Bedlam Outreach about two years ago. But before I ever moved to New York, I had [heard of Bedlam's](#) inventive, aggressively theatrical interpretations of classic plays. And as a teaching artist involved in connecting military veterans with humanities texts, I had also [heard of Stephan Wolfert](#), Bedlam's director of outreach.

Bedlam might be a new theatre company, but it largely consists of experienced artists, and I think that might be why the focus and scope of their outreach program can comfortably include veterans. As one example, Stephan has been a teaching artist for more than twenty years. He left the military in the late '90s to study classical acting, first training at Trinity Rep and then with Tina Packer at Shakespeare & Company. To join Bedlam, Stephan relocated to New York from Los Angeles, where he had founded the [Veterans Center for the Performing Arts](#), and wrote his one-man play [Cry Havoc!](#) (among many other projects). And as a second example, Eric Tucker, the founding artistic director of Bedlam, served in the Navy and first worked with Stephan in graduate school. Since then, Eric has become one of the acclaimed interpreters of the classics of his generation, and just in the last few years he and his artists have created a [Saint Joan](#) that restored Shaw's comic sense of evenhanded ruthlessness, [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) that reminded us that fantasy can be a synonym for nightmare, a double-take [Twelfth Night](#) that explored Shakespeare's language with the precision of a diamond cutter, and a [Sense & Sensibility](#) that put social humiliation on wheels. To use Olivier's favorite phrase, Stephan and Eric have both been "jobbing actors" for a long time. Without this history of experience and military service among Bedlam's leadership, I doubt that Bedlam Outreach could have sustained its weekly efforts amidst the daily struggle for resources that every theatre company endures. (It also helps that the [Sheen Center](#) generously opens its doors to us at below-market rates; that guest artists like [me](#), Judy Molner, [Alex Mallory](#), and [Tom O'Keefe](#) kept the class going when Stephan could not be there; and that our managing director, Kimberly Pau Boston, is [a playwright-producer](#) with years of experience working with military veterans. Outreach is hard.)

At any rate, Stephan and Eric both opened doors for me to learn from them, as they have for many other military veterans. They allowed me to undertake a Mission Continues Fellowship at

Bedlam Outreach and then encouraged me to teach some of the Monday night classes. This led to one of my proudest Outreach moments, an open-house presentation of the monologues and short plays of Lou Bullock, a non-combat veteran from the Korean War era.

I suppose most people these days, when they try to imagine the typical military veteran, think of our recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan; therefore, they may not immediately imagine someone like Lou Bullock. This would be a serious mistake. The veteran population as a whole skews just a few years shy of the average age of retirement. As a consequence, a lot of our best work at Bedlam Outreach occurs when we engage with veterans in their fifties, sixties, seventies, or, in Lou Bullock's case, his eighties. (Up at Lincoln Center Education, Eric Booth and his fellow teaching artists sometimes refer to this kind of work as "[creative aging](#)." I love the phrase, though I can imagine our veterans rolling their eyes at a mild euphemism.)

The demographics of our students, combined with the fact that we only meet once per week, help to dictate the kind of work Bedlam Outreach undertakes inside the rehearsal room. A lot of our veterans, for example, prefer not to memorize lines. They instead arrive at the Sheen Center each week open to whatever exercises or Shakespeare scenes we can cook up in a three-hour time span. As a whole, the classes avoid the intensity of conservatory training or the rigor of an academic study of Shakespeare's plays. Instead, we emphasize our veterans' immediate reactions to scene work, as well as their response to Shakespeare-inspired writing prompts.

From time to time, however, we hold an open house to share the work of our veterans. In a couple of instances, our open houses celebrated the personal writings of two of our veterans, Lou Bullock (a skilled monologist and quirky scene writer) and Phil Milio (a Vietnam veteran and an introspective story-teller). I deeply believe in these sustained performance opportunities—they are my favorite part of Bedlam Outreach, because I never feel a greater sense of camaraderie than when I witness (or work towards) the art of watching and [being watched](#) in the crash course of public performance.

At Bedlam Outreach, we believe in the power of the performing arts to help reintegrate veterans into civilian life and to help them articulate and understand their experiences through the communal process of making theatre. By rehearsing and performing scenes from Shakespeare's plays, as well as the writings of our veterans, we believe we are making a contribution to building a better community in the face of an increasingly solipsistic world.

Rather than further justify or explain our program using my own words, here is a monologue from our own Lou Bullock.



*photo by Ashley Garrett*

## **The Flu Shot** **By Lou Bullock**

Thirteen years ago I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. It's not a discouraging problem in these days of medical technology, so I marched myself over to Sloan Kettering where I underwent radiation therapy for 40 days. About four weeks into my therapy the oncologist called me in and told me that the radiation treatment was compromising my bone marrow and that it was imperative that I get a flu shot.

He told me that for some reason the shots were difficult to get that year, and though Sloan had the vaccine they preferred to save it for those patients who needed it most. So I marched off to my internist, who told me he did not have any vaccine either.

And so it went with all my medical contacts.

A friend then told me that the VA had the vaccine. So I marched off to the VA where a heavy lady with a lot of gold jewelry interviewed me. I told my story: I didn't need VA care, just a flu shot. She took my history and financial status and then left the room. When she returned she simply said that her superiors had reviewed my case and that it was determined that I could financially take care of myself. And then she said, "Medically you do not have a respiratory problem or an immune deficiency disease. You only have cancer. So we cannot give you a flu shot."

I don't remember what happened after that. I was stunned, I guess. Fortunately, the story has a happy ending: I got my flu shot through my labor union. I finished therapy and got on with my life. But that statement, "You only have cancer," ate at me.

Look, I've heard a lot more distressing VA experiences here at Bedlam Outreach. But my experience made me think of how little my country appreciated my service. I was drafted just out of school. I spent two years in a foreign country. How much were those two years worth to my country? Flu shots cost—what? \$20? So that's 10 bucks for each year spent overseas. And that is what my country thought of my service. I got on with my life. But it continued to eat at me.

Now, this is what brings me to Bedlam Outreach. When strangers visit our open house nights, I'm sure they wonder what we do here and why we study Shakespeare.

In our reading of *Much Ado About Nothing*, one of the characters asked of a battle, "How many gentlemen have you lost in this action?" The answer was, "But few of any sort, and none of name." Our stalwart leader explained to us that this was how most casualties were related in Shakespeare. The nobles might be listed: the Duke of Essex, the son of the Earl of Hereford, etc. and then: "The rest of no name."

I began to think. All through American history American military men have had distinctive names. The Minute Men or the Green Mountain Boys in the Revolution. Johnny Reb in the Civil War. In the First World War we were the doughboys or the Yanks. And in the Second World War, of course, GI Joe. Even our enemies had names: the red coats, the Jerries.

But since World War II, and after several wars that no one can explain (or even remember), we really have not had a name. We were "our men and women in the service." No name.

Well, in the parlance of our elected and appointed officials, perhaps we do have a name: We are now "boots on the ground." Boots on the ground. Boots. A name you call your cat. No: an inanimate object. In today's world if you have a hole in that boot, you don't even repair it. You throw it away.

That's why we come to Bedlam Outreach. It's a place where we have a name. And it's a name given us by Shakespeare. He spoke of soldiers as a "band of brothers." And that's what we are. A band of brothers—and in today's world—a band of brothers and sisters. A group of men and women with a common life experience. Not a unique experience, but a shared one which bonds us. We have a place where we have each other's back, where we can talk and laugh and bare our wounds both physical and psychic in a ritual of love, knowing that we have never-ending support from our brothers and sisters.

And at Bedlam Outreach all this is inspired by a dramatist/poet who lived 400 years ago. A man who included soldiers in almost all of his plays. A man who loved and laughed at our foibles and who honored our service and our bravery.

So here's to you, late of no name, and now my band of brothers and sisters: I thank you for being here for me, and I salute you.

\*\*\*



John M. Meyer works as a playwright-performer in Austin and New York. His stage-play *American Volunteers* won the Mitchell Award at the University of Texas and subsequently made the long list for the Dylan Thomas Prize in the United Kingdom. He recently appeared in Aquila Theatre's *Our Trojan War* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and on a U.S. national tour. Much of John's work draws on his experiences as an Airborne Ranger. He served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and his military awards and badges include the Bronze Star, Good Conduct Medal, Combat Infantry Badge, Parachutist Badge, and Ranger Tab.

(photo by Steven Noreyko)

*Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national service organization for theatre, and Blue Star Families, the country's largest chapter-based military families non-profit organization, are pleased to support the third round of the Blue Star Theatres Grant Program. Through support from MetLife Foundation, the Grant Program funds efforts that deepen the relationship between participating Blue Star Theatres and their local military community: veterans, children of active duty military, military spouses, and/or active duty military. Each theatre received \$5,000 to support activities that could include talkbacks, outreach programs, sponsored tickets, performances, playwriting workshops, readings, or workshops that focus on military themes and service.*



**MetLife Foundation**

