

LandHomeHero

Serving Soul Repair: *Bringing our own hands to bear*

(This [blog post](#) is a part of series highlighting the work of recipients of TCG's [Blue Star Theatres grant program](#). California Shakespeare Theater is the recipient of Blue Star Theatres grant funding supporting the project, Land Home Hero.)

By [Krista DeNio](#), Artist Investigator, [The Triangle Lab](#)

Veterans know service; were trained for service; are of service.
Whatever one carried into military service, one comes out with a deep relationship with service.
Veterans share this with military brothers and sisters and a powerful, often unspoken bond, based in both body and action.
This shared understanding carries between military veterans whether they have been in combat or not.

I am not one for generalized statements about general groups of people, but in my last five years of experience working with military veterans, these statements have consistently been true.

In the [Land Home Hero](#) project, we have been studying our hands.
[We] are: Chaplain Marianna Sempari (goes by M.A.), myself and twelve male veterans who have encountered homelessness and are currently housed through Berkeley Food and Housing Project.

In long discussions on the nature of service, realities of homelessness, moral injury, moving forward, carrying forward, carrying....this epiphany moment arrived: HANDS.
As Chaplain MA pointed out, our hands hold so many things for us, literally, metaphorically, historically, memorically.
As those who have served our country and carried so many things from machinery, to paperwork, weapons, to fallen comrades, to their own children, often great heartache, burden, loss, [and most of things that most civilians carry too]—these men have profound relationships with their own hands.
What do these hands carry? What have they done? Where have they been? Who have they served? What do they want to carry forward? What do they want to release?

From a few of the men:

*Hands Love Jobs
Family Time. My life*

*They talk, they gesture and communicate.
They protect, guard and reassure.
They comfort, caress and nurture.
They give meaning to their owner's feelings.*

*Blessing gift to have
Because why complain
when some have no
hands
hands can be bad*

hands can kill
hands can Heal
Hands can teach in Sign language
if your overseas and don't know what's spoken to you
Some places life has a sign
So with my two fingers peace and
Live life

With our company of men, we discuss our themes: the nature of service, veterans' commitment to service, how the project can serve the community through sharing personalized stories, that come with the faces and bodies who carry within them the paradox of having served ones country and then finding oneself homeless. The irony of having joined a system to support it and later being lost within the bureaucracy, struggling for basic support, care, services. Right. And then there are the ongoing consequences of Moral Injury, Physical Injuries and the great need for Spiritual Care, as being provided by Chaplain M.A.

Did you know that veterans make up 12% of the homeless population in this country, while making up only approximately 13% of the total U.S. Population?
51% of homeless veterans are over the age of 50.

As it turns out, veterans are also excellent dancers and choreographers.

They might laugh at me when they read this blog post.
(Which is alright by me. We do a lot of laughing at ourselves in rehearsal.)
But what I have seen in our recent rehearsals has been remarkable.

Have you ever seen 6-8 pairs of hands, ages ranging from 38 to 70, moving together through a sequence of gestures?

This is where live performance work comes in.

This is where working in the moving body (with all its histories, challenges and current realities), working together physically in time and space, can sometimes create the most potent communication of all.

Never will I be able to communicate in words, the elegance, fortitude, strength, gentleness, hard labor, injury, expertise, stories untold...that these hands express, as they move through simple gestures together in the air.

Reaching in toward one another, to the shoulder on their left, landing one pair of hands into another.

Thriving in specificity, accuracy and the search for meaning.

Slowly...gradually...allowing literal meaning to sometimes take a back seat, to the pleasure of simply moving with breath and steadiness, through the air.

Whether their military service was recent or decades ago, something all military members are taught is attention to detail, the importance of moving as a unit, the life or death importance of responding to the movement of others.

It's beautiful to see these hands discover the power of their own poetic potential.

As we have worked, we considered many times over what forms might best serve the sharing of our processes with the community. How to share specific pieces of personal narratives that the men are ready, wanting, willing or specifically driven to share, their own ongoing modes of artistic expression [poetry, music].

And how do we share with the community, the complex intersections of personal storytelling, education and the powerful process of spiritual care?

Our final form: Audience interactive performance ritual (in a church).

Here, with audience placed in the round, the men will lead everyone together in a gestural, flocking structure, using our hands, naming ways we relate to, share with and hold up the community. Here, in the round they will witness one another share testimony and be witnessed; If we're lucky, Robert will play his saxophone, Mr. McGee will read his poetry, Alex will tell the tale of his amazing towel, (which has been with him now for decades and has seen, done and been so many things)...and Joaquin will bring his voice and lyrics to the stage.

This group of veterans, from World War II to Iraq and Afghanistan eras, from the South, North, East and West, will be seen as the artists they are, the heroes they are, as the humans they are.

And our audience will be asked to join the conversation, to become the infrastructure of the storytelling space and to participate in listening with their minds, hearts and hands.



Krista DeNio is a choreographer, director, performer, writer and dance | theater educator, committed to developing new forms of performance work and evolving interdisciplinary thinking and creation between the fields of dance and theater, among others. She also facilitates arts, education and activist organizations, focused on cultural and social innovation, collaboration and social justice initiatives. Currently, she serves as the Artist investigator at the Triangle Lab at the California Shakespeare Theater.

Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national organization for theatre, and Blue Star Families, the country's largest chapter-based military families non-profit organization, are pleased to support the inaugural 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.

