

Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance

Volume 20 *Shakespeare and Intermedial / Cross-Cultural Contacts*

Article 4

December 2019

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Recommended Citation

Pennacchia, Maddalena (2019) "Theatre Strikes Back in the Digital Era: An Interview with Stephan Wolfert," *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance*: Vol. 20 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.18778/2083-8530.20.04

Available at: <https://digijournals.uni.lodz.pl/multishake/vol20/iss35/4>

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Theatre Strikes Back in the Digital Era: An Interview with Stephan Wolfert*

The interview has been conducted
by Maddalena Pennacchia (Roma Tre University)

Abstract: In this edited interview, Stephan Wolfert, American actor and playwright, talks about his pluri-awarded play, *Cry Havoc*, a one-man show he has been performing since 2012 with several variations through the years; the play is autobiographical but it is also the exemplary story of many US veterans who cannot find a way to readjust to civilian rules once they come back home. The play tells of Wolfert's struggle with Shakespeare's words in order to find his own voice to speak what could not be said differently: his own trauma. By bringing to the fore a number of veterans in Shakespeare's plays, starting from Richard III to Hotspur, Henry V, Coriolanus and many others, Wolfert fascinatingly lights up corners of the Shakespearean macro-text which we knew were there without really seeing them. Wolfert's approach, in his show as well as in the use of Shakespeare within the DE-CRUIT Veterans Programme he founded, highlights the importance of human interaction through the mediation of the most ancient among media: theatre. Shakespeare's writing for the theatre, with its characteristic intermedial quality (as it is suspended between page and stage) and cross-cultural inclination (as it has travelled the world), reactivates a holistic sense of the body and, in so doing, it channels powerful and deep physical emotions that can be expressed and shared with mutual benefit by actors and audience alike within the safe communication environment of theatre. Wolfert's work makes the most of all this and even puts Shakespeare's language to a therapeutic use for US veterans.

Keywords: *Cry Havoc*, trauma, DE-CRUIT Veterans Programme, Stephan Wolfert.

Introduction

Born in the period of early print culture, when there still was a strong residual orality, Shakespeare's writing is ontologically suspended between page and stage and thanks to this 'intermedial quality' it has easily adapted to each new analogic medium that has appeared on the communication scene: from popular

* Stephan Wolfert is an American actor, writer, and director; founding Artistic Director of Shakespeare & Veterans and creator of the DE-CRUIT Programme.

press, to cinema, to the radio and television. But it was with the digital turn, at the end of the last Millennium, that Shakespeare's writing started to freely circulate across the whole communication circuit; a circuit whose junctions were made of media that only then could speak the same binary language, thus enabling any message to be digitally remediating and consequently transmitted globally within a network of interrelated platforms (Pennacchia 2012, 13-51).

Within this digital scenario, where screens have increasingly become the principal mediators of Shakespeare's language, Stephan Wolfert's work appears as extremely innovative for getting back to the medium-specificity of theatre. In fact, theatre *is* a medium (and probably one of the most ancient at that) firstly because it always re-presents human experience as mediated, but also because it has developed its own representational techniques and communicative technologies, as well as its privileged channels, that is the *loci* where actors and the audience meet. True as it might be that the word "theatre" comes from the Greek *theaomai* (to behold), communication in theatre does not limit itself, for those who attend, to "seeing" what the actor is doing on stage: the space of performance expands beyond the stage to include the audience who is there, a group of sentient bodies ready to react with all senses to what psychologists call "emotional contagion". Bruce McConachie explains this phenomenon from an anthropological standpoint maintaining that: "[w]e evolved from creatures that traveled in groups, and the need for solidarity forged through emotional contagion to enable everyday cooperation and defense against predators remains a strong part of our evolutionary heritage" (67-68). In fact, a theatre audience not only experiences feeling, which is a bodily response that can be triggered and enhanced by closeness, but emotion, that is what Erin Hurley defines as "an act of interpretation of bodily response," which is largely cultural and therefore extremely variable (19); more importantly, emotions possess a relational quality, as Hurley contends: "if emotion is made in the relationship between stage and audience (the stimulus and the receiver, if you will), it cannot simply be projected by actors and caught as the same emotion by the audience. The theatre's emotional labour, then, is, in part, a negotiation" (20). And it is exactly this emotional negotiation, via Shakespeare's language, that stands at the core of Wolfert's work.

Stephan Wolfert, American actor, writer and director, was in the US Army from 1986 to 1993 as a Medic and Infantry Officer, and left his military career after attending a performance of *Richard III*, as he himself tells us in his autobiographical one-man show, *Cry Havoc*. A journey into the author's heart and mind, looking for the human being behind the trained soldier, *Cry Havoc* follows a thread of Shakespearean words leading to the re-opening of shut alleys in the brain: and it does so by way of emotional negotiation and bodily closeness. Wolfert rewrites and performs the story of his life by re-enacting Shakespeare's many veterans: from Richard III to Antony, from Coriolanus to

Henry V and many others, and he thus discloses for his audience a completely unknown world; at least unknown to those who are not familiar with actual war and the military; so, it aims at building a community of spectators who, as human beings, social actors and political subjects, will hopefully become more mindful and attentive to the condition of veterans.

The beneficial effects of the arts, and in particular of theatre, in the treatment of stress disorders have long been acknowledged, but not only is *Cry Havoc* a show that affects as deeply its spectators as it does the artist that each time performs it; thanks to Stephan Wolfert's indefatigable energy and vibrant devotedness to the veterans' cause, *Cry Havoc* has also been turned into a "method" to be transmitted to other veterans in order to help them out of their trauma via the DE-CRUIT Programme <https://www.decruit.org/about/>.

I had the privilege to attend Stephen Wolfert's play on January 21st 2019, during the first edition of the *OnStage! Festival* in Rome (produced by KIT Italia, i.e. Laura Caparrotti and Donatella Codonesu) at the Off/Off Theatre <http://onstagefestival.it/festival-2019-2/>. Struck by his performance, which has been defined as "a militant show, at the end of which Wolfert took serious responsibility for his theater and for the emotional pain he might have caused" (Compagnoni), I invited him to deliver a talk to students at Roma Tre University and on that occasion I asked him to be interviewed; he accepted and I here report the edited version of that deeply engaging conversation, which has helped me seeing theatre in a new perspective. After that, Stephan Wolfert featured as special guest of the International Conference ESRA 2019 (European Shakespeare Research Association), held at Roma Tre (co-convenors: Maria Del Sapio Garbero and Maddalena Pennacchia) <http://esra2019.it/>; his much acclaimed performance of *Cry Havoc* was hosted at the Roma Tre Palladium Theatre on July 10th 2019.

I would like to express here my heartfelt gratitude to Stephan Wolfert for his extraordinary generosity in sharing his thoughts and experiences.

* * *

Maddalena Pennacchia (later as MP): *Let's start from the title of your play: Cry Havoc. It is a quote from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar; why did you decide to use it? What does this phrase mean to you?*

Stephan Wolfert (later as SW): The phrase is lifted from one of Mark Antony's speeches in *Julius Caesar*: "Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war" (2:1:275). Most people, even people who don't know Shakespeare, recognize it, and especially veterans. It is an ancient military order: "cry" meaning "yell," and the word "havoc" meaning "devastation," or "the rules of war no longer apply." There are many phrases and words on different continents and in different

cultures that mean the same; in spite of what the actual words are, when you cry to break the rules of war the implication is that *there are* rules of war in the first place, and that there have always been, even in ancient warfare. I think that's something that's lost for the average modern person; today people think rules of war have been established only at a certain point, say from World War I, but they have always existed.

MP: *So, you say that there have always been rules of war, but at the same time those rules have often been transgressed. Can you further explain why it is so important for you to make people aware of such a dynamic?*

SW: The reason is that we should bring war closer to people who don't experience it first hand; especially in the United States. Other than 9/11, we've not had any hostility in our country either in our time, or in our parents' or our grandparents' time; actually, not since the Civil War from 1861 to 1865. So, we're in some way distant from it. The question is: how do we bring war closer to people? Theatre helps to do that.

MP: *I agree. Pragmatically speaking, theatre can play a crucial role in today's fragmented society, because no other medium can engage to such a degree participants in political contents as a group of people who, by sharing an aesthetic and knowledge experience in the same place and at the same time, are turned into a community of interrelated and interacting bodies; while I contend this, I am also aware of the on-going debate on the definition of presence and live-ness (especially in relation to the audience) in the challenging context of the digital and social media culture (Purcell). Notwithstanding the remediation drive which has affected theatrical practices—as, for instance, the filming, registration and/or broadcasting of live or quasi-live productions—(Pennacchia 2017), however, I believe that theatre as a medium 'in presence' still best contributes to realize Aristotle's ideal of the human being as zoon politikon, a being that is capable of feeling as well as reflecting on his/her own actions, laws, and habits together with his/her fellow creatures; and for what I've seen of your approach, in your show you enhance both the tendency to create a community and the interactive characteristics which are intrinsic to this medium by entering into a direct dialogue with your audience.*

SW: Yes, this happens before the show and in the talkback afterward, when I nudge the audience into making questions and being involved. And people often ask "what does 'cry havoc' mean?" Then we can discuss what it means to throw out the rules of war; what it means to rape, pillage and burn. That is, what happens when civilians are no longer treated as civilians. What does it mean to give certain orders and send men and women, even men and women who train for war, to do that and then ask them to come back into society: that's a lot! In fact, the original title I had chosen was *Cry Havoc and Now What?*: "we've gone

to do this; and then? What the hell do we do?” Actually, I don’t even know if there are rules of war anymore; I mean, we establish them but then ... drones, bombs, as I say in the play, are havoc themselves; they don’t discriminate between combatant and non-combatant, they just kill everyone on their path indiscriminately. So, isn’t that havoc? And every time we drop a bomb, what were the rules of engagement for that? Well, it turns out—and I say it as someone who was in the military—there are different rules of engagement, different determining factors as when to use a missile vs when to send a squad of rangers or a SEAL team. And who decides that? It’s not the civilians, it’s the military. I want this stuff out in the light, I bring it up so that we can all have this conversation and involve at a deeper level everyone that should be making that decision.

MP: *It seems that Shakespeare was well aware of who was making the decisions with respect to the rules of war.*

SW: Even though it’s most famous for being quoted by Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, “cry havoc” is a phrase that is used directly or implied almost in all of his history plays and some of the tragedies as well. In *Henry V*, that’s what Henry V is actually saying outside at Harfleur: “you know, you have two options: surrender now or I’ll cry havoc.” He doesn’t say the phrase, but he says “I will let my men do whatever they want, as soon as we get into the gates—and we will get into the gates”; he says: “[I will let my soldiers d]efile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters; / Your fathers taken by the silver beards, / And their most reverend heads dash’d to the walls, / Your naked infants spitted upon pikes, / Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused / Do break the clouds” (3:3:35-40); that’s havoc, that’s throwing out the rules of war. It’s in many of Shakespeare’s plays, wherever there’s combat, either formal or informal.

MP: *Yes, and the moment in your show when you perform these words is almost frightening: it is in that precise moment that you break more evidently the fourth wall by physically invading the audience’s space [see Figure 1]; moreover, by dangerously approximating your body—vibrating with the prospective devastation pictured in Henry’s words—to those of the audience, you produce what Bruce McConachie calls “emotional contagion” or “the millisecond triggering of mirror neurons in many spectator brains interacting together” (67); there and then spectators are brought to understand, through the experience of so many men and women in the military you represent, that the horror of “havoc” can happen any time in real war depending more on the convergence of heterogeneous factors than on the decision of single leaders; so, while we are there participating in your performance, crying and laughing with you, we are prevented from just enjoying a well written piece of drama which*



Figure 1. Stephan Wolfert. *Cry Havoc*. Rome. OnStage! Festival. January 2019.
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draws inspiration from Shakespeare! Through the engrafting of Shakespeare's words into real military experience we, as audiences, are exposed to the naked truth that the rules of war have been established at the beginning of human history and since the beginning of human history have also been disregarded. We are shocked by a truth so terrible that we would prefer to shun it, we would rather not to look at it but, in the end, we are forced to experience that truth at a deeper psychological level. To this purpose I'd like to point out that, in the article by Alisha Ali and yourself (2019), there is a very effective use of psychologist Keith Oatley's theory of "imaginative simulation"; I was particularly struck by Oatley's definition, in one of his articles, of Shakespeare's plays as "simulations of the interactions of people in their predicaments so that the deep structure of selfhood and social interaction becomes clearer. [...] As we run such simulations on our minds, we not only experience the emotions and hence the urgency of the human vicissitudes and dilemmas that cause them, but we are enabled to reflect on them in such a way as to create deeper level mental models of ourselves and others" (Oatley 33). I think your show urges the audience to build new "mental models" out of sheer emotion; in other words, not only do we, a freshly built community of spectators, put ourselves in the shoes of veterans from a deeply emotional standpoint, but we also start to

speculate at a higher intellectual and ethical level: “what would I do in the same situation? Is there a right way or a wrong way to behave, and how do I decide between them?” What interests me here is, of course, that your privileged tool to achieve such an ambitious result in your spectatorship is Shakespeare. Why Shakespeare?

SW: There are so many reasons. Reason number one is history; at the time when Shakespeare was writing his plays about war, we learn that Elizabethan England was in two wars: one in Ireland, a nine-year unconventional warfare that was similar, I'd say, to Americans' *guerilla* with Vietnam and Afghanistan; and one with Spain, a conventional 'On-Again Off-Again' war of the kind we've had, for example, in Iraq. In his book *1599* James Shapiro describes how, as England was preparing to fight the Spanish Armada, working-class men had to leave their trades—the yeomen, the farmers, the blacksmiths—to be part of the military. So, Shakespeare could actually meet many veterans in his own time and he wrote about them perfectly! The best example of Shakespeare really understanding the veteran experience is Lady Percy's speech to her husband in *Henry IV, Part I* (2:3:32-59); Hotspur has just come home from combat and is leaving the very next morning, and she starts asking him a series of questions. Jonathan Shay, a famous psychologist who worked for many years with Vietnam veterans, wrote a book called *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994), where he takes those lines, puts them in a grid, and next to each question made by Lady Percy to her husband lists symptoms out of the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) describing the PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder): why don't you sleep? Why don't you eat? Why are you melancholy? Why do you curse? Why do you stare all night looking out of the window? Why do you start for all those loud noises when you're sitting all alone? Four hundred years ago, Shakespeare laid out in verse what veterans are still going through today! So, here's the second reason: veterans get it that Shakespeare is writing about their experience.

MP: *I see your point: Shakespeare lived in times of war and, since he is a matchless playwright at inventing characters with complex feelings and thoughts, he is also peerless at representing the psychology of veterans he could actually observe around himself in Elizabethan England and thus, to put it in your own words, he creates a “resonant trauma-infused language” (Ali and Wolfert: 61) which can be used effectively in therapeutic practices by today's veterans.*

SW: Precisely, and on this I will say more in a moment. Another reason to choose Shakespeare is verse itself: the [blank] verse is written in the natural human rhythm of heartbeat and breath: there are five important stresses in each line and roughly five heartbeats per line, and then we take a breath. Now, if we look at military training we see that the “manipulation” of breath (if I can use

this word for the sake of argument) is done basically in the same way: when they train us to fire a weapon—of course, they take people who’ve never fired a weapon before—they teach us to breathe in and then breathe out, stay empty, squeeze the trigger in between our heartbeats... pop... breathe in, exhale, acquire the target, squeeze the trigger between heartbeats... pop... it’s that... precisely! Look at when we run or march together, we’re in a rhythm just like the [blank] verse, we all breathe in together at the same time and we all sing together in a verse format. In the DE-CRUIT Programme we’re teaching veterans to breathe together, which is something that’s familiar to them, but now they’re doing it with poetic lines describing their experience.

MP: *So, what happens when you teach veterans how to “manipulate” their breath to deliver Shakespearean lines instead of firing a weapon?*

SW: There are a couple of things that happen here: when veterans are using Shakespeare’s verse to voice their experience, they are provided with enough aesthetic distance from their trauma, especially in the case of severe trauma, to actually allow themselves to speak it: “it’s not me, it’s Hamlet asking ‘to be or not to be’; sure, secretly, I may have been suicidal and wondered these same questions, but I’ve never set these out loud.” So, Shakespeare’s character works as an avatar, it allows a barrier between the person who speaks and the people who might judge him or her. When veterans say the line, they can see people responding and also accepting the character who speaks, because that’s what happens in theatre—the communalization of trauma: a person sharing a deep personal truth directly to a room full of strangers...which, by the way, is what Shakespeare’s soliloquies were: these characters went out in front of a group of strangers and worked out their problems; they didn’t say I’ve got all the solutions, they were asking “what do I do?” Here is Claudius, for example: “And like a man to double business bound / I stand in pause where I shall first begin, / And both neglect” (*Hamlet*, 3:3:41-3); Claudius is asking: “What do I do? I can’t pray and I can’t forgive myself, what do I do?” So, veterans get to do this through one of Shakespeare’s characters, but with that buffer; at the same time, Shakespeare’s poetry puts them in a heightened state—by which I mean that it puts them in a state that feels like life or death but it isn’t; we know the binary in the military—kill/ don’t kill, life/ death; here it feels like that, but it is not, so we learn to live in between that binary, where heart exists. That place where “it feels like it, but all I do is to follow the rhythm of Shakespeare’s verse and I’ll be okay.” Shakespeare provides the form for veterans to share their experience, to be in that heightened state, to be received and yet survive it.

MP: *It feels like a very powerful method!*

SW: Yes, you just have to follow the format; while it may be very traumatic at the beginning, because sometimes the verse stirs so much stuff that veterans—

we—want to follow our usual coping mechanism (close off, crunch up and stop breathing), the verse forces us to breathe in and speak the next line, and go to the end of that soliloquy in *Hamlet* or of Sonnet 35 (“No more be grieved at that which thou hast done”), and by the end we’ve purged the poison, as Yvette Nolan has taught me; we get rid of everything, we’ve spoken the unspeakable, as Tina Packer says; the taboo is out there and now I see that the audience receives me. But most importantly, and that’s the final thing, because of that breath and rhythm that Shakespeare provides, the body is forced physiologically to stay in association or regulation, we are not allowed to disconnect from ourselves, we are forced to stay in coherence, which also then teaches the body: “Oh, I *can* talk about this and survive; Oh, I *can* remember these intense emotions and feel them fully and survive and not let them determine how I’m going to behave, but just share it.” Does this make sense?

MP: *Yes, it makes a lot of sense! That’s exactly how Aristotle’s catharsis works. But I am very interested in the fact that you said you’ve learnt it from Native Americans (you were talking about Yvette Nolan, one of the founders of Indigenous Theatre in Canada). Did I get it well?*

SW: Yes, I’ve been lucky enough to be mentored by Yvette Nolan up in Canada, she’s from the Algonquin Nation, and Randy Reinholz, who’s Choctaw from modern day Oklahoma but he is in Los Angeles now. I have been working for more than a decade with two Native Americans theatre companies: Native Earth in Toronto (Nolan) and Native Voices in Los Angeles (Reinholz). Just being in the room with them and seeing them embrace theatre as a medicine was a privilege; I mean, in Art School I heard it all the time: “theatre is therapeutic but not therapy”; but what the Native American community says is “yes, it is therapy!” We would work on incredibly horrific stories: there’s one play called *Tombs of the Vanishing Indian* by Marie Clements and even remembering that play just breaks my heart, and makes me so emotional; but after working on that for eight hours or more, what they did was—in their tradition—going around the fire in circle; and each nation went in a different direction, in a rhythm, while singing a song—I don’t even know what we were singing or in which native language, it turned out it was a kids’ song—but, when we got done, I felt better. We went through something horrific for about eight hours and then in three to five minutes, by just doing the song with the dance and the circular movement, I felt better, not just better, but better than when I had entered the room. That’s just one example of how I was able to watch those people embrace theatre as a form of medicine and how I tried to glean as much as I could from them without taking—everything that I use is with permission, because my ancestors did nothing but genocide and stealing from their ancestors; I asked if I could use the term “medicine wheel,” because we circle a lot, and the Native American community gave me permission to do so; I wanted to make sure that everything I did was with their blessing.

MP: *This kind of ritual can indeed be medicinal, and it seems to me that such a respectful borrowing from the Native Americans' heritage has allowed you to create a fascinating cross-cultural practice, embracing the local tradition of medicinal performance to make it dialogue with the European theatrical tradition of Shakespeare, who inherited, thanks to the resurgence of humanae litterae in Elizabethan England, the tradition of the Ancient Roman theatre, and the Greek cathartic theatre before that; so, what you are describing is a beautiful interaction between different heritages and traditions, all aiming, from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and beyond, at experiencing theatre as a meaningful social tool, as catharsis or medicine or therapy. From what I've read about recent developments of the DE-CRUIT Programme (Ali et al.), hard sciences have also recently entered the picture in order to try and measure the effectiveness of the method you've been elaborating once you started your collaboration with the Department of Applied Psychology at New York University.*

SW: Actually, one of the best books to begin to understand what's going on with the veterans I'm working with is Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*. He somehow convinced a number of people who were severe PTSDs to volunteer and have CT scans and fMRIs (real-time, three-dimension pictures of the brain) while they were re-experiencing their trauma. The pictures showed that their brain didn't realize that they were here and now, safely in a hospital room and in a machine—it's a scary machine, but it's not life or death. This means that the brain shuts off, relives that experience, and takes back the body to that place: the heartbeat is the same as when that happened—the respiration; the chemical distress hormones, adrenalin—everything that happened at that time is now pulsing again through their body. So, how do we stop that? There are a lot of practices like chi-gong or yoga that ask us to ground and breathe, plant our feet on the floor, realign our spine, get our body back in the position in which it works best, which is its natural position. So, we're not doing anything really new: these are ancient practices and they do work, they do begin to calm the brain, the heart and the body down, but they don't bring the body back to "coherence" or back into regulation. With the DE-CRUIT method, however, by speaking in the verse rhythm and using Shakespeare's texts, we begin to turn on parts of the brain that had gone offline due to trauma, for example Wernicke's and Broca's areas—these are the areas that are linked to the production and comprehension of speech; that's why yelling to someone with PTSD "Calm down!" doesn't work, because their brain is not even registering the sound of those words. But breathing by the verse rhythm and speaking Shakespeare's texts (which is a foreign text even for an English native speaker) force these areas to come online, to try and understand "what is that? What does that mean?" And then to speak it out loud requires a different part of the brain. So, slowly, just by speaking a Shakespearean monologue, we see that the brain

comes at least relatively back online, at least enough to be here and now and not living in the past; or, in worse cases—which is not a bad thing—here and now and *also* there and then.

MP: *The areas of the brain you have mentioned, if I understand well, are areas that have suffered damages from trauma, and they are actually linked to the production and understanding of both spoken and written language. What I find of extreme interest is the fact that, in the wake of your practical experimentation with Shakespeare and grass-root work with veterans all over the US and, later on, through the collaboration with applied psychology academicians at New York University, you have developed a theatre-based therapy for veterans that uses Shakespeare's 'trauma-resonant' monologues to reactivate their capacity to speak their own trauma in a group (and so listening to and being listened by others) and then re-write the monologue 'in their own words' (thus producing a text that will be read and then spoken by another member of the group). In combining theatre-therapy with self-narrative written activities, you work on the four linguistic abilities: speaking and listening, reading and writing. I was struck by the fact that veterans gradually learn to use a figurative language that they apprehend from Shakespeare (not only from reading silently but from speaking Shakespeare's words aloud) and thanks to the use of metaphors and symbols they can articulate what they feel and cannot literally say, and that's how they start to improve (Ali et al.: 10). This takes us back to your own use of Shakespeare in Cry Havoc; would you say that you adapted his texts to your own life-story when you wrote the show?*

SW: It's not a direct adaptation but a borrowing of his brilliant words in the way I think, feel and see them and generally always have, even in graduate school: in the play, I talk about how in graduate school I was different from my classmates because I responded differently to certain stimuli; but something I don't talk about in the play is that I saw most of the texts differently from my classmates: we worked on *Henry V* and what I saw was them responding the way most Americans do, "yes, we're right to invade this country"; even with progressives and liberals, and even though they're not imperialistic by nature, they got into that excitement of thinking that in order to lead a bunch of men and women into war all you got to do is being motivated enough. But that's not what the text was for me, the text was very personal: in the Feast of Crispin's speech, when Henry's saying "look, it's really unlikely we're going to survive this and those who do will carry the scars and in the scars the memories of each person here." And that, as you can see now, did resonate very deeply with me; it wasn't a rousing speech, it was much more sombre, it was: "if there's anyone I'm going to die with, it's this group here. We may not have chosen the fight we're in, but we're here and I'm glad I'm experiencing it with this batch ... we few, we happy few, we band of brothers (*Henry V*, 4:3:60)". That's how it resonated with me.

MP: *You also reprise Coriolanus in your show, and you see the eponymous protagonist of the play as a berserker, someone who is easily possessed by a frenzy of combat.*

SW: I have seen *Coriolanus* done so archetypical, with Coriolanus as this guy that hated civilians and civilians hated him, and the politicians hated him, and the civilians hated politicians; but what I saw was someone who was sixteen years old when he was placed in a combat. What does that do to someone who's developing at sixteen? And in that first battle against Tarquin's army, he's cut three times (potentially mortal wounds), meets Tarquin himself face to face and, by the way, had to kill three people with a sword, and now is facing this demi-demon of Tarquin and kills him. That's at sixteen years of age, then he goes on to fight seventeen more years of combat. He doesn't sound like somebody who's going to be able to come home and adjust. Even in classrooms or rehearsal rooms I don't see Coriolanus examined as a human being, as a young boy who lost his innocence. But then when Vietnam veterans, who were thrown from the age of seventeen or nineteen into combat, read his speeches, they get it; they seem to say: "I know what that is like. I know what that 'I banish you' speech is about"; because Vietnam veterans came home and were treated horribly and got the double moral injury of combat and being banished by their countrymen and countrywomen. And then there's the part when Coriolanus goes to Aufidius, his enemy: when I'm working with civilians and other actors, they don't see what I see; what I see is two men who fought each other, hated each other's guts, but understand each other more than any other living human being including their wives. By the way, there are studies on this behaviour saying that men and women who fought in the military have a deeper connection with the men and women they fought with than their own siblings or their own spouses. There's something that happens in those extreme conditions of war and training, for war creates a closer bond; Shakespeare got this, but people in the rehearsing room don't seem to get it from the text. Think also of Othello and Iago; I did this play in graduate school and we did a lot of talkbacks, and in every talkback that I can recall civilians would ask: "I don't understand how Othello believes Iago." But when I started experimenting with veterans who didn't know Shakespeare at all, I gave them extracts of the play and said "read it out loud to each other, what do you think it means? What are the relationships? Who is who?" By the third time they had read the extracts, they got it; they figured out that these are comrades: Othello and Iago, who fought in at least four campaigns together (Iago says so); and they see that Othello cannot but believe his comrade-in-arms, when he says "are you sure about your brand new, younger wife that you don't know very well?"

MP: *Actually, you are right: Othello is a soldier to the bone, how can he not believe Iago who is the comrade that shared life/ death situations with him on*

the battlefield? This might indeed be a new perspective to shed light on features of Shakespeare's characters that have so far been read differently or even neglected...

SW: ... as I told you, Shakespeare was surrounded by veterans and he understands them perfectly!

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