

Such Stuff podcast
Bonus: Shakespeare and Remembrance

[Music plays]

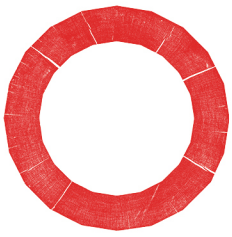
Imogen Greenberg: Imogen Greenberg: Hello, I'm Imogen Greenberg and welcome to another bonus episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

November 11th 2018 will mark the centenary of Armistice Day, one hundred years since the end of the First World War. Here at the Globe, we'll be hosting a special evening of performances to commemorate the occasion. The event, Shakespeare and Remembrance, will reflect on Shakespeare's imagined experience of war as well as the lived experience of those who have seen the realities of twenty-first century military life.

In putting this event together, we have been asking whether Shakespeare is accurate in his accounts of war and its effects on the lives caught up in it? Can his words shed light on today's experience of war? Does art have a place in discussing these experiences?

We've been working with the Soldiers' Arts Academy to put together a cast of performers, made up of serving and ex-serving military personnel and their families, to perform extracts from Shakespeare's plays, alongside original pieces written by those in the show about their own experiences of conflict.

The results are an extraordinary testament to the power of art, theatre and of course, Shakespeare. There are stories about



the harsh toll life at the front line can take – but also stories of heroism, comradeship and sacrifice, of connection and survival.

[Music plays]

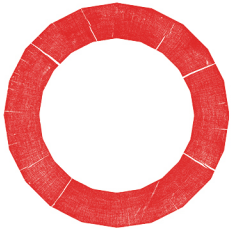
IG: So today on the podcast, we'll be asking, what can the real experience of war teach us about performing Shakespeare and what can the performance of Shakespeare teach us about war and its effects?

We went behind the scenes in rehearsals with Neil Davies, Shaun Johnson and Max Hamilton McKenzie to find out more about their journeys since leaving the Forces.

This episode does contains explicit language, and references to suicide.

First up, Neil Davies. Unlike some of our other performers, Neil doesn't do a lot of acting and performing, and he's never read Shakespeare before. But his piece, *The Patrol*, which he's written especially for Shakespeare and Remembrance, was sparked by reading Shakespeare for the first time, just a few weeks ago. We caught up with him in rehearsals. Here's Neil...

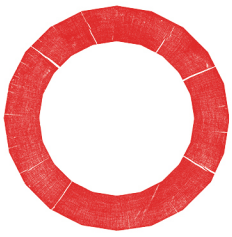
Neil Davies: I've never read any Shakespeare. I really hated him. Mainly because I thought it was for posh people and grammar school boys. See, I went to a secondary modern and my brother... So my brother went right to Hollywell and I went left to Mold, and the bus that went to Mold took the secondary modern kids, and before we left, the grammar school boys used to pelt it with stones. So they did Shakespeare. So immediately you thought Shakespeare's not for us. Yeah, I



had this prejudice for so long, and then basically seeing Shaun in love with Shakespeare, and he's a fellow soldier, I thought 'ahh, come on Neil, it's about time you got over this prejudice of yours, isn't it?' So they sent me Titus which I read, and literally as I was reading it the memories came flooding back. I couldn't believe it. I think the imagery and Shakespeare's words just seem to hang there and you get a picture with every kind of bit of sentence. So I got the picture and I thought back to this patrol I was on. This all just came out, it was just poured out of me and I wrote it all down and I sent it in, which made me look at it again and work through it and as I worked through it, it's actually put me outside of the experience and it's put it into context, and it's actually given me a way of looking at that memory without curling up under a duvet and refusing to get out of bed for days. Because what used to happen to me with PTSD is, er, I took drugs for a while when I came out of the army, then I tried to kill myself several times, then I tried partying, and then, you know, I was just kind of like a pinball machine, I was bouncing from thing to thing. And it took me a long time to try and settle down and the way I did that was to get rid of all the memories, and now I've realised that actually it's like cutting off a limb. I need to get all those memories back, put them in place and re-establish who I am. So actually by doing this and writing it and trying to learn it, it is a catharsis 'cos I've thought of lots of things I did in the past, I thought 'Oh god, no wonder I did that, ah that's because of this'. So it's given me a dialogue with myself.

[Extract from The Patrol]

ND: I tried to banish the tears of remembrance.



But memories chased me, ghosts of the fallen, frozen youth
whilst survivors just fade away.

And over these year's, Titus' words echo...

For all the frosty nights that I have watch'd
And for these bitter tears, which now you see.
Filling the aged wrinkles in my cheeks.

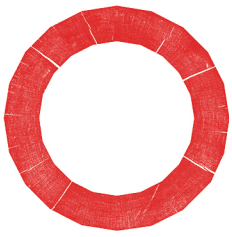
Memories haunted me, a nineteen year old in combat, in Aden
in the Yemen. The last outpost. The sun was setting on the
British Empire.

Be pitiful to my condemned sons,
Whose souls are not corrupted as 'tis thought,
For two and twenty sons I never wept.

Two and twenty. Twenty two. The size of a platoon, average
age nineteen...

ND: God, I've got to read him, more of him now haven't I? I've
got to read Titus Andronicus. I was telling somebody, I've
promised to read Titus Andronicus and they said 'Ah, fuck me
lad, it's brutal stuff, you won't get through that without crying a
few times'. I'm looking forward to getting the Collected Works
maybe? Or Henry V, I wanna read that now. 'Cos I saw a
quote from that, I thought, that looks interesting. What it's
done is dispelled a myth that Shakespeare's not for me. Not
only is it for me, but it's almost written to give me the imagery I
needed, 'cos I've got like a certain dyslexia, er so the imagery
comes over very powerful.

Look I started reading Titus, I didn't get past the first two
sentences. I thought, 'Bloody hell, William, you must have

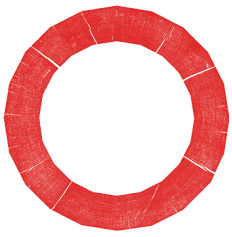


been listening to some stories in those taverns around the Globe'. The imagery I've got, have you ever been to the Union Jack club in Waterloo? It's a kind of non ranks club. So I've been in there a few times, and all you hear is stories. And they're always very funny and they're always very tragic, and there's a lot of banter and it's very much the black humour. But you get from that what these people are going through and you can string it together. And I think Shakespeare must have been hanging around in taverns, and I believe back then there were quite a lot of soldiers who would be telling stories, begging for money, missing legs, missing an arm and he had a genius for putting it all together, didn't he? Putting it into words. I thought he must have been very visual, very visual memory, mind, to actually capture all that and so he must have had all these pictures in his head, and just jotted them down I should think, and then when he's writing Titus, he goes scrambling through, 'Where's that parchment from the Dog and Duck'? So I think he must have listened very hard, a lot of the time. I've met some writers, they never stop talking. He must have been listening a lot.

[Music plays]

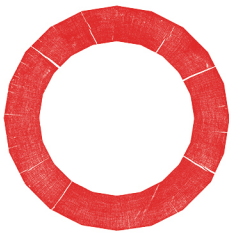
IG: The Soldiers' Arts Academy is a platform through which serving and ex-serving military personnel, and their families, can participate in the creative and performing arts. Shaun Johnson and Max Hamilton McKenzie have worked with the organisation for a number of years, and performed in various shows and performances produced by the group. We chatted to them about their journey into performance, and how Shakespeare made his way into their lives. Here's Shaun...

Shaun Johnson: I found it really difficult when I left the military. I thought it'd be quite an easy transition. I'm an armed



forces veteran, and an armed forces child as well. I was born in the military, Dad served, went to schools all over the world so I naturally joined the army. Joined for initially 22 years, had a crush injury halfway through, and sadly left the military. When I came out of the military I thought it'd be a really, a real easy transition but that's when I realised, I was in a new world. I didn't know how to do it really, if that's the word. So I was dealing with a crush injury, um and I was also hiding a few psychological issues as well. I immediately realised that I'd lost that band of brothers, that connection in the armed forces. I'd been on two tours of duty and we had each other's backs all the time. And now suddenly I'm in the big bad world and that was gone. So yeah I played around with the idea of acting at first 'cos I didn't wanna be me. I wanted to escape these demons inside. And I didn't go to a fully accredited school, I was all over the place with things. But I took two years acting lessons and just by chance, I bumped into an American woman called Jackie Mcloughlin who was doing something with military veterans in the UK and Shakespeare of all things. She asked me 'would I like to get involved' and I was terrified. I thought 'Shakespeare? Who does Shakespeare? I can't even read the stuff let alone when you try and play it out'. And do you know what? What a discovery. We formed a theatre company, what was called the Combat Veteran Players back then. The journey started there, certainly with Shakespeare and it just got better and better. So suddenly, this chap Shakespeare was in all our lives.

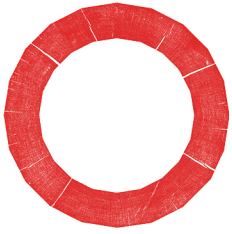
Max Hamilton McKenzie: My name is Max Hamilton McKenzie. I actually came across acting before the services. I come from a family of actors, filmmakers, sort of originally, a family that I'm estranged from, originally from Russia. Basically I came to the UK at an early age when I was 7. My mother married a British diplomat who was stationed in



Moscow at the time and I used to do, I was at drama classes, I used to do contemporary dance and things like that. And then at school, I didn't have a very good education. My education I was disrupted a lot, so I didn't get any qualifications at school, so the only choice I kind of had was to join the forces. So I did my time in the forces, which was a broken service. In between I worked in the music sort of business. Then my beautiful son was born, I thought I needed a bit more discipline in my life, so I joined the Territorial Army, the reserves, full time reservist and I saw service in Kosovo in 1999, and then I came out and I basically went and decided to work in normal, boring jobs. And then one day, I met Shaun Johnson, another ex-military actor, and they were part of this Shakespearean acting group and they said 'Max, why don't you come along and join us?' And I was a bit 'Well, I dunno, it's a bit nuh, nuh, nuh' And I didn't understand Shakespeare at that time, at all, whatsoever, so I went 'OK, I'll give it a go'. And I found it really, really therapeutic, really um amazing, you know learning about Shakespeare and learning about how he wrote things and just learning a completely new language really, to me, because Shakespeare was a complete foreign language to me, and um, I really enjoyed it. And I loved being on stage...

[Music plays]

IG: All of the work that Soldiers' Arts Academy do is testament to the power of the arts to transform peoples' lives. We asked Shaun and Max about art as rehabilitation and exactly what performance has offered them since leaving the military...

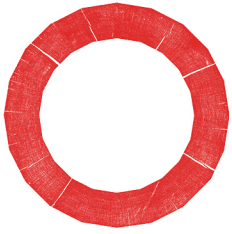


SJ: I've seen the rehabilitation. There is something about art, I don't know what it is, it brings people together. And over the last four, five years, I have seen some astonishing art from guys who've been troubled. I don't know why that is. I've seen guys who have emerged as brilliant writers, playwrights, all sorts, artists. So yeah I mean art is incredibly influential in people's recovery.

MHM: It's kept me focused is the main thing. So it's really focusing on not being isolated. That's one of the things lots of ex-forces, sort of guys and girls, are going through is isolation. And a feeling of, feelings of low self-esteem, people not understanding you, or what you're going through, or what you've been through. So being involved in groups like this or any kind of like artistic outlay, I think it's a fantastic thing because it keeps you focused, it gives you something to do, it gets you interacting it with other people. And especially if the people are mindful of... they may not know what you've been through or what the things that have happened to you in your life. But if they're at least mindful of, yes, we are fragile, and we need support, we need help, we need confidence boosting, we need lots of things. But once we're, once we get up to a good level, I think there's no stopping us, we sort of we can give as much as get, and maybe sometimes a little bit more because we've had a lot more life experience in some cases...

[Extract from The Patrol]

ND: In summer's drought, I'll drop upon thee still;
In winter with warm tears I'll melt the snow.
And keep eternal spring-time on thy face.



And in the going down of the sun we shall remember them,
the ghosts of past wars visit me in my sleep, lest I forget them.
But time marches on and survivor's fade, of fallen comrades.
But still we wondered who the enemy killed.

So thou refuse to drink my dear son's blood.

[Music plays]

IG: Shakespeare and Remembrance will be in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse on Sunday 11th November. You can book tickets online or through the box office. All proceeds from the event will go to Soldiers' Arts Academy.

You can also catch Shaun and Max in Soldier On!, the extraordinary play by Jonathan Lewis, and a Soldiers' Arts Academy production, which is playing now at The Other Palace until 24th November.

You've been listening to Such Stuff, with me, Imogen Greenberg.

Our theme music is from the album Mali in Oak and was recorded in our very own Sam Wanamaker Playhouse.

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