

# Shadows of History, Echoes of War: Performing Alongside Veteran Soldiers and Prison Inmates in Two Canadian Applied Theatre Projects



George Belliveau and Monica Prendergast

**Abstract** This article explores two distinct and unique groups of men not usually associated with theatre performance: veterans and prisoners. Each author was closely involved as an artist-researcher in one of the respective applied theatre projects that took place in two separate cities within British Columbia, Canada. Belliveau worked on developing and directing *Contact!Unload* in Vancouver where he worked with military veterans who experienced psychological related trauma injuries while serving overseas. In Victoria, Prendergast participated as an actor and co-deviser with a group of federal inmates in a collective theatre production called *Here: A Captive Odyssey*, which traced the history of the William Head prison. These two case study projects represent examples of what might be called “inreach” theatre education programs. This articles explores the process and implications of collaborating with veterans and inmates in devising the two separate theatre productions.

**Keywords** Artist-researchers · Applied theatre · Veterans · Prisoners · Theatre education · Devising · Case study

## 1 Introduction

What does it mean to tell one’s personal story or the story of a place? What does it then mean to perform these stories for an audience? These questions lie at the heart of the two case studies we share in this article. Two distinct and unique groups of men not usually associated with theatre performance become our focal point and participant groups: veteran soldiers and federal prisoners. Both applied theatre

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projects took place in British Columbia, Canada and each of us as authors was closely involved as an artist-researcher in one of the respective theatre productions. We consider these two projects examples of what might be called “inreach” theatre education programs. In each case, we worked as trained and experienced theatre artists/educators/facilitators in a co-devising and co-performing relationship with our male participant groups. We will consider the implications and possibilities of this notion of inreach in our conclusion. To begin, we outline the two case study projects.

*Contact!Unload* was first produced in April 2015 in a professional theatre venue in Vancouver, British Columbia and featured the stories of four soldiers. The 50-min play was an initiative where researchers in group counseling and theatre education collaborated with military veterans to dramatize and perform what it means to return from combat. *Here: A Captive Odyssey* was a devised theatre piece tracing the story of William Head Peninsula, 30 km outside of Victoria, British Columbia. This land has been home to a federal medium and now a minimum-security penitentiary over the past 50 years, often nicknamed “Club Fed” for its reputation as a site of great natural beauty. But prior to being a prison, William Head was an infectious diseases quarantine station, an immigration entry point to Canada, a Scottish pioneer’s farmland and traditional fishing grounds for local First Nations communities.

## 2 Methodology

We use a case study model (Yin 2014) to examine the complex and creative interactions within the two contexts, as this allows us to share insights in a focused yet flexible manner. Both case studies are *intrinsic* in nature (Creswell 2013), as they are based on insights discovered within each performance-based research project. To explore the intricacies and insights discovered within each site, we consider three key phases of our projects: script development, rehearsing, and performing.

Specifically, we pose the following research questions: what devising and play-building approaches were used to generate the stories that led to the script? And, in what ways did the art-making process within the scripting honor the voices of the veterans and inmates? Once a structure and working script was developed, what approaches were used in rehearsals to work with these unique community groups to make the process inclusive, artistic and authentic? Finally, what insights emerged for the participants when performing these stories for different audiences?

Due to our unique insider perspectives in these projects—working as co-creators and co-performers whilst also taking on roles as co-facilitators, acting mentors and vocal coaches—we use a reflective practitioner voice to consider the responses to each of the questions addressed (Dawson and Kelin 2014; Duffy 2015; Schön 1983; Thompson and Thompson 2008).

### 3 Literature Review

There is a rich and growing literature on *devised theatre* (Graham and Hoggett 2014; Heddon and Milling 2006; Mermikides and Smart 2010; Oddey 1994), *ensemble theatre* (Bonczek and Storck 2013; Britton 2013; Leonard and Kilkelly 2006), *collective creation* (Barton 2008; Syssoyeva and Proudfit 2013; van Erven 2001), *playbuilding* (Bray 1991; Hatton and Lovesy 2009; Norris 2009; Tarlington and Michaels 1995; Weigler 2001), *applied theatre* (Prendergast and Saxton 2016, 2013; Prentki and Preston 2009; Taylor 2003; Thompson 2005) and *research-based theatre* (Beck et al. 2011; Belliveau and Lea 2016; Belliveau 2014; Prendergast 2010a, b). As scholars, practitioners and teaching artists in the fields of drama/theatre education and applied drama/theatre, we are familiar with and have drawn on a range of play creation models from these key sources and others to guide our work within these projects.

### 4 Case Study 1: Contact!Unload

Community members, artist-researchers, along with four veterans participated in a series of drama-based workshops for a period of 3 months in Vancouver in order to devise *Contact!Unload*. The theatre initiative was part of the Man/Art/Action project<sup>1</sup> where the arts were used to engage veterans to share stories of trauma and pathways towards recovery. In April 2015, the development process culminated with a production at a professional venue on Granville Island near downtown Vancouver. Four veterans along with six civilians performed the 50-min theatre piece to sell out audiences for three evenings. This drama project was an expressive vehicle for military men to publicly reinterpret their experiences of transitioning from active service to civilian life in ways that build resilience. The creative process provided a forum for veterans to model men's engagement with the emotional, physical, and cognitive effects of participating in war. A foundational piece of the theatre project stems from work that Westwood and Wilensky (2005) have developed over the last few decades called *Therapeutic Enactment*, a group counseling strategy. Therapeutic Enactments (TE) asks people to “enact critical events from their own life—enacting the narrative, going beyond language to express the self through action, movement, emotion, and reflection” (Westwood 2009, p.1). In this approach participants revisit past injuries in hopes of correcting neural pathways, mending parts of themselves that have become broken or separated from the person. Westwood, co-PI on the Man/Art/Action project, also contributed to the development of the Veterans Transition Network (VTN) ([vtncanada.org](http://vtncanada.org)) which offers group counseling support to veterans who suffer from stress related injuries

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<sup>1</sup>Man/Art/Action was a 2-year project funded by Movember Canada under the umbrella of the Men's Depression and Suicide Network (<http://menshealthresearch.ubc.ca>).

post-deployment. The theatre piece worked hand in hand with Westwood's initiatives and approaches, with trained counselors and counseling psychologists as part of the creation and performance.

To unpack some of the learning that took place in this project George will focus on how using a community, collective playbuilding approach (Belliveau 2015; Norris 2009; Rohd 1998) shaped and informed the script development, rehearsal, and production.

## 5 Script Development

This phase of the process used key aspects of Norris' (2009) playbuilding approach where information, primarily stories, were gathered and generated in the exploration space with the veterans as key informants. The exploration space was an art studio where we worked alongside visual artist Foster Eastman ([fostereastman.com](http://fostereastman.com)) who was developing a brother project with veterans carving a tribute pole that depicts what it means to serve one's country and return home afterwards. This synergy between the visual art and theatre was critical later in the project as the tribute pole became a centerpiece for the play.

Graham Lea was lead writer for *Contact!Unload*. We generated data from various sources including previously published work about the veterans, interviews, audio and video recordings, along with Graham's own notetaking during the playbuilding phase. As the artistic lead and director of the theatre piece, I worked closely with Graham to develop a frame for the play. From the outset, we wanted the story to emerge out of the veterans' experiences and voices, rather than Graham attempting to write his interpretation of what it might be like for soldiers to serve and return with injuries. In this sense he became a creative scribe (Lea 2012), gathering, editing, and shaping the stories they shared during rehearsal. Shakespeare's St-Crispin's Day speech from *Henry V* (where King Henry, outnumbered by the French armies, rallies his soldiers for a final battle) became an important thread within the structure of the play, allowing the veterans to respond to the Shakespeare speech with their memories and lived experiences of battle. Two of the veterans also shared poems where they wrote creatively about their personal experiences after returning home – versions of these poems were integrated within the play. Finally, scenes from Linda Hassell's play about veterans *The Difficult Return* (2014) resonated deeply with our troupe, and with her permission we adapted a few of her scenes for *Contact!Unload* during our playbuilding phase.

In the first weeks of the project we spent time in a circle to share stories, which generated a sense of trust and community amongst our group of veterans, researchers, and artists. We slowly introduced non-verbal drama-based activities during these early sessions to stimulate the veterans to express their stories through the body. Our aim with the Man/Art/Action project was to do, and within the doing to discover, unpack, and process moments that might have been locked up or paralyzed. Once we had the soldiers on their feet creating visual tableaux the embodied

experience brought out new understandings and emotional responses to these fictive moments. After each drama activity, we would process what happened and debrief in a group circle. The embodied drama work often triggered one or two of the soldiers, consequently, the drama process would pause as the counselors intervened to make sure these moments were voiced and processed appropriately.

Initially, it was the four soldiers who could become emotionally activated from time to time (i.e., triggered), who became emotionally connected (or disconnected) to the various tableaux and short scenes. However, as we progressed with the work we recognized the emotional activation not only touched the veterans, but the ‘triggers’ began to include the entire group, with the civilians equally affected. It was during this phase that we became a ‘company’. In sharing and disclosing stress injuries and vulnerabilities, the soldiers had opened themselves by sharing their experiences with the group. For our part as civilians, we were no longer only hearing but instead listening, understanding, and feeling the impact of the veterans’ lived narratives. Or, as Mike says in the play: “What it truly means to come back” (Lea et al. 2015, p. 16).

In Therapeutic Enactment, when group cohesion is developed and a high level of perceived safety present, an individual is invited to share a significant part of their story, usually a moment of distress that is unresolved psychologically. Trained facilitators carefully guide the individual to re-enact the traumatic moment “in order to discharge or release the trauma” (Westwood 2009, p. 2). The rest of the group in a TE acts as a support network, where they listen closely, witness and enact various roles within the individual’s story. The group serves as a support for members helping members, taking on part of the weight, or trauma of the individual through their active witnessing (Westwood 2009). All the veterans and most of the civilians in our group had already participated in a TE and were familiar with the process involved. Therefore, this therapeutic approach became instrumental during the playbuilding phase, so when a veteran shared his story the group this helped lessen the intensity of what was being carried and a felt sense of relief would follow as a result of being ‘witnessed’ by others. This sharing of the weight within the company became key to moving forward and central to shaping the actual script.

After 2 months of playbuilding, drafts of the script were generated by Graham with continued consultation from the group. Graham’s careful listening of the veterans and the group discoveries in the playbuilding resulted in an authentic script that honored the group’s collective stories. The veterans saw the emerging script as representative of their stories and experiences, and gave it their ‘stamp of approval’. It became clear to the artist-researchers that this script could not have been created to the same degree of authenticity by merely examining interview transcripts, videos and/or journal notes. We needed to be in the space with the veterans, co-creating the work to ensure immediate validation of their stories by them directly. The community experience that took place within the script development phase was critical, as it generated ownership but also elicited the unspoken kinship soldiers have with one another. This kinship amongst the soldiers fed into the rest of the company and led to a smooth transition for rehearsals.

## 6 Rehearsing

Because the content of the play is deeply personal, processing and debriefing the stories became central during each rehearsal. Therefore, at the beginning and end of each session, time was dedicated to talking in a circle to unpack some of the triggered emotional responses. Initially, there was a slight sense of frustration from the artists involved, because valuable rehearsal time was being taken up by extensive talking rather than being on our feet. However, in time we discovered that this debriefing time was not lost, but instead part of the soldiers releasing their psychological injuries – which is an essential part of the therapeutic process in work within trauma. The veterans were rehearsing their way into accepting, subconsciously seeking consent/trust from the group, before they publically shared their stories of injuries to a wider audience. The unpacking discussions were vital in solidifying trust, building safety, and most importantly providing permission to reinterpret and theatricalize the personal moments shared by the veterans. The debriefing allowed us as a company to feel more comfortable performing the work to an outside public audience.

At times in rehearsal we moved one step forward, before moving two steps back. For instance, an artistic intention within the staging would trigger something in a veteran that would require rethinking, restaging, and further discussion. Either the staging of the scene was not authentic to a military experience, or it felt too close (personally) for them to depict within the play. The semiotics of theatre are often guided by showing rather than telling, where metaphors are used to suggest something, foreshadowed earlier or later for a reveal. These theatrical layers which Graham and I placed within the script and staging are based on years of experience of working in the theatre. These layers were appreciated and recognized by the veterans when the directors took charge in this manner, as veterans respect leadership being taken when needed, even though they often questioned as to their authenticity. The veterans were sharing some of the rawest moments of their lives, and they did not necessarily want us to couch or distort them. Once they accepted to share these experiences, they wanted them to be represented as accurately and truthfully as possible on stage. For example, our final scene depicts a TE where Tim shares his experience of being a radio operator in Afghanistan during a combat mission. Within the TE experience Tim needed time to process this event, and the counsellors guided him carefully and slowly through the re-enactment of what happened on that night of the attack in Afghanistan. For theatre purposes, we were condensing a 3-h TE experience into about 5 min of stage time. Therefore, moments overlapped, and the pacing increased with sound and lighting effects. A negotiation took place with the company to honor Tim's experience and at the same time provide a theatrical experience for a theatre audience.

Compromises and negotiations of working with personal stories and theatre became a constant conversation, and it is within those moments that growth occurred. Upon reflection it was those moments of debate, initial difference that led to mutual understanding, and this propelled the most important discoveries we

made in rehearsal. This was exemplified within the scenes where Mike Waterman who played the ACTOR portraying Henry V, and I playing the DIRECTOR role within the play.<sup>2</sup> Mike begins by playing the Shakespearean role Olivier-like with grandeur and pomp. Within the script the veterans keep interrupting Mike and I to share their experiences of what it really means to go to war and then return to civilian life. As the play progresses, Mike gradually shifts his Shakespearean delivery towards a more authentic tone. By the end of the play his St-Crispin's speech loses the grandeur, heroism, and it becomes more honest and truthful. His journey is the one the company experienced throughout the rehearsal phase, where the script was no longer an artifact or representation of their stories, but instead an honest, authentic depiction of what it truly means to come back from war and what many men carry with them post-deployment.

## 7 Performance

Many of us in the company felt that were we to have ended the project after the playbuilding and rehearsal phase we would have accomplished our mission, due to the deep impact the veterans had on the civilians, and vice versa. The veterans furthered their journey towards recovery in the sharing and accepting of their narratives.<sup>3</sup> However, as the veterans said on numerous occasions during our development, they're "showing their shit" so others might not have to suffer with continuous psychological injuries. They wanted other veterans (and their families and friends) to see this work to make them aware of pathways towards recovery, to understand this difficult journey. At the core it is about men helping men, and the veterans wanted others to know there are ways to deal with stress injuries that are much more productive than the end of a gun -suicide. They wanted policy makers to see this work, so programs such as the VTN be in place for all returning soldiers. The production was part of their mission to share this work with a wider audience.

The artist-researchers involved in the project saw the project as a workshop production, where feedback and responses from the audience would help further the possibilities of introducing applied theatre with returning veterans. In conjunction with professional technical staff at Studio 1398 on Granville Island, lighting and sound were incorporated in the play amplifying some of the dramatic moments, but more importantly creating an aesthetic space for the soldiers to have others witness their stories. With all the accouterments of a professional venue, including a dressing room, raked seating, lights, sound, box office, the company of soldiers and civilians rose to the moment to face the welcoming audience. The pre and post performance periods brought out child-like excitement within the group. This

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<sup>2</sup>The meta-drama frame of the Director and Actor is influenced by Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

<sup>3</sup>Pre and post interviews with the veterans clearly indicate the psychological benefits the four men experienced during the 3 month process.

nervous energy and euphoria helped release some of the tensions depicted within the context of the play. The whole became much greater than the sum of our parts.

In my dual role as a director and actor, production time became more about persuading the soldiers that they were ready to perform, to tell their stories. My French-Acadian grand-father spoke of being an *arrangeux* (a cheerleader, confidence-builder) in his senior years, which in essence is someone that convinces others that they can accomplish a task no matter how challenging. I became an *arrangeux* for our company, fostering belief in this company of non-actors that they could be true to themselves on stage but still authentically *perform* a version of self. As raw emotions were revealed the soldiers needed to find ways to be performing a character, even though that character was based largely on themselves or close experiences. This ever so slight distance between themselves and the character allowed them to step on stage and courageously reveal very personal moments within their lives to an outside audience. Standing beside them on stage, inside the work, continued the journey I travelled with them, beginning with devising, directing and culminating in co-performing. (Monica, in the second case study, fleshes out a number of the intricacies of what it means to perform inside the work that speak also to my experience as actor).

The power of the community that was built during the play development and rehearsals allowed the soldiers to perform with confidence and panache. The soldiers had a distinct unspoken look between one another that suggested – *you have my back and I have yours, so let's get through this*. This unspoken bond among the four veterans was one that the company recognized from the beginning of the play-building process. We could not fully understand this bond, but we all knew that the nods allowed them to feel solidified.

From this day to the ending of the world,  
But we in it shall be remember'd;  
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers... – *Henry V*, Act iv, Scene iii

## 8 Case Study 2: Here: A Captive Odyssey

William Head on Stage (WHoS) is the longest running prison theatre company in Canada, now in its 34th year. The company began as a course delivered by the University of Victoria Department of Theatre and for many years theatre students and instructors were involved. However, over the past decade or so, community theatre artists from Victoria have been the outside collaborators with whom the inmate-run company chooses to work on their annual fall productions. Public audiences are allowed onto the prison grounds, following security clearance, and shuttled in vans to the gymnasium that houses the theatre company where its performances occur. Upward of 1500–2000 audience members attend WHoS shows each year.

In the more recent past, the company has been encouraged by their theatre community collaborators to move into devising their own plays rather than mounting pre-existing plays. In 2014, WHoS approached local director, actor and teacher



Kate Rubin (who had appeared in two previous WHO S shows and also directed *The Hobbit*) with the popular book by Mitch Albom, *Five People You Meet in Heaven*. This source material about how one's actions can resonate through many people's lives over time was adapted into *Time Waits for No One* and proved to be a popular and critical success. Early in 2015, the WHO S Board Members approached Rubin to facilitate and direct another new play, this time based on a book the men had encountered about the history of William Head, *Quarantined: Life and Death at William Head Station, 1872–1959* by Vancouver historian Peter Johnson. The Prison Arts Collective of Ten women theatre artists in collaboration with William Head on Stage prison theatre company, devised and performed a play about the past history and present reality of the William Head Peninsula in October and November of 2015.<sup>4</sup>

My (Monica's) involvement with WHO S began with playing Thorin in *The Hobbit* in 2012, as Rubin and I have worked on other theatre projects since 2004. I had also volunteered in the summer of 2014 to support the company's development of *Time Waits...* and was eager to have the chance to work again on a WHO S production. The fascinating history of William Head was a strong lure and so I joined the Prison Arts Collective in early 2015 and participated in many aspects of the play's creation as co-deviser, workshop leader, co-dramaturg, vocal coach and performer in *Here: A Captive Odyssey*.

## 9 Script Development

The playbuilding process was based on improvisation, both physical and dialogical. Each weekly workshop session involved sharing historical research, discussing the inmates' responses to the stories we were discovering and improvising scenes and movement sequences based on these responses. WHO S runs their workshop series with an open door policy so we never knew week-to-week how many men would appear; but as word got around the institution, the number of inmates showing up regularly increased. By the time the script moved into rehearsal mode we had 19 men who had signed on to perform in it, and a number more to do backstage work, design, lighting, publicity and front of house. Four women, including myself, were also performing to bring the cast number up to a total of 23.

The structure of the workshops was very much about creating an ensemble, so we always began with group building games and skill building activities. For the inmates, learning to play again, and to begin to trust we women as the 'street' artist collaborators and (more importantly) to trust each other were all necessary steps along the way. These things take time, and the whole creation process for *Here* unfolded over a period of 6 months, from May to October of 2015. Weekly sessions moved into twice a week, three times a week and by the time we were into full

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<sup>4</sup>The Prison Arts Collective received funding for the project from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Capital Regional District Arts Development Office.

production rehearsals, every day for the final couple of weeks. The inmates regularly expressed their amazement at the amount of time and effort it takes to put on a show. Occasionally they would grumble about it a bit (as do most actors I know on the outside!) but their dedication and commitment to the process was deep. Many of them had never performed on stage before, so there was a tremendous leap of faith from these men that they were indeed going to succeed and not be made to look foolish in front of a paying audience. It was our job as the professional teaching artists working with them to ensure that was the case.

While we developed the ideas for the play, it became clear that we wanted to explore two timelines, the past and the present. The historic events we were finding out about were rich for all of us, but the inmates also wished to share some aspects of their daily life with the public audience. WHO'S audiences are both loyal and quite diverse, consisting of young people as well as more middle aged and senior members. They may come at first for the 'thrill' of the experience, but they come back due to the unexpectedly high quality of the theatre. They also return—as they tell us in talkbacks and on audience comments cards—because their preconceptions about prisons and offenders have been shaken. This is an essential aspect of WHO'S, to break down audience's preconceptions about who an 'offender' is and what he is capable of achieving. Although I am comfortable with the notion of WHO'S offering rehabilitative experiences to participant inmates, I can also see that there is a rehabilitative process going on for audiences as well.

After we had selected the key topics and scenes for both the past and present sections of the play, the task became to find a dramatic and theatrical means to weave these time streams together. We agreed the play would be best as a non-linear experience, as a time travel spiral or vortex rather than a chronological and perhaps overly didactic progression in time. This agreement led us to explore how one of the play's two inmate protagonists (Bill and Ed) might be pulled from the present into a somewhat surreal journey through the past. At some point early on in the process we had thought about having a movement sequence involving a Chinese Dragon dance, as the previous year's show had a Bollywood dance number in it that had been a huge hit. This idea morphed as a local indigenous elder told us stories about a legendary sea serpent with transformative powers. The sea serpent, a giant illuminated puppet designed by our set designer Carole Klemm and operated by six actors, is hooked onto Bill's fishing rod and he is swallowed up by this creature that then drops him into various historical events at William Head. We had found our dramatic framework.

## 10 Rehearsal

The script for *Here* went through a number of drafts, seven in total by the time the show opened in early October. Kathleen Greenfield, co-artistic director of SNAFU Dance Theatre, who had performed also in last year's *Time Waits...*, took on the major task of gathering notes from each workshop and typing them up into scenes,

23 in total within an 80 min one-act play. We then worked in small groups on revising each scene's dialogue, structure and/or movement according to how the groups felt about the scene, collectively, and what changes were needed. We were also adding songs and musical soundscapes under the direction of musical director Katrina Kadoski. A member of the Prison Arts Collective would be the facilitator for these various group processes and we would share our work with the whole group at the end of the workshop. Some scenes required revising right up until we opened the show. Other scenes felt like they were working well almost right away.

In July the play was cast and to the best of our knowledge the inmates were pleased with the roles allotted to them, although some worried about how well they would do in them. A great deal of our energy was taken up with skill building and encouragement, or as George mentions earlier being *des arrangeux*. I began to work with the ensemble on their vocal articulation and projection. The theatre at William Head is a converted gymnasium and the acoustics are a challenge. I was determined that these men's voices would be heard by every one of the audience members who came, right to the back row of the house capacity of 175. Inmates are experts in self-criticism as the nature of imprisonment is to constantly remind them why they are there, that they have failed themselves, their victims, their loved ones and society as whole. Their burdens are heavy ones, and hard to bear. My job was to provide some lightness along the way, and to ensure their voices were loud and clear. The opportunity to perform in a WHoS show is often described by the men as a welcome 'escape' because the environment is one of acceptance, playfulness and creativity. But theatre makes its demands and learning the discipline and what it takes to make a performance succeed has always been a key focus for me when working at WHoS.

The show began to appear around us. Carole Klemm's set and projection designs—featuring a mooring dock thrust stage and two small side stages off the main proscenium stage—created the worlds we were entering. Kathleen Greenfield supported the development of Klemm's historical image projections and the shadow work that director Kate Rubin wished to evoke as ghostly presences. Three old-fashioned overhead projectors created beautiful shadow designs and silhouetted effects for our play on three large screens. Poe Limkul's lighting carved out emotional and physical spaces for us to occupy. Katrina Kadoski's music and sound creation with the ensemble was powerful underscoring for the play. We found simple but effective costumes for 23 performers playing multiple roles. Rubin guided us with expert and patient care through character creation, scene blocking and orchestrating this large ensemble through 23 scenes.

My role became even more to support their acting work as a co-performer. When I act alongside the men, I am trying to mentor for them what it is actors do; how they think, how they focus, how they make choices, and how they must forgive themselves immediately if they make a mistake in order to avoid making more and more of them. Being present, being in the moment, listening closely and reacting authentically, adapting to given circumstances and being responsive are all acting skills of great value to these inmates. I try to model silence and readiness backstage and in

the dressing room, and to illustrate the preparation necessary in order to feel confident stepping into a role, and out into the lights. The men find it very amusing when I stumble on my lines in rehearsal and occasionally swear, as they see me very much as a teacher, a sister or a mother figure. They know I teach drama and theatre and some of them know I work at the local university. But I do not speak to them about being a professor or a scholar. The class divisions between us are wide ones. I try to be sensitive to these differences and they fade into the background in the pressing necessity of getting our show up and running and ready for its first audience.

## 11 Performance

The men are nervous but excited for our first performance to an audience. This preview performance is for the other inmates at William Head, as well as staff and volunteers. In many ways this is the toughest house we face as these inmates are not an experienced audience and so let us know if they are getting restless or bored. We manage to hold their attention and some lines that refer to aspects of life in William Head get the biggest laughs we get all during the run. For example, at one point Bill is talking to a young girl in the 1930s whose father is a rumrunner, running illegal alcohol up the coast from California to British Columbia. She asks Bill if he has ever been on a boat. He replies sardonically, "Where I am from we are not allowed on boats." Inmates are allowed to fish at the prison, but only allowed in the water for occasional traditional indigenous ceremonies. A number of attempted and successful escapes here have taken place via water, so this shared knowledge gets a humorous response.

We open to a warm and responsive public audience the next night. The men keep expressing their wonder that they are actually doing well, that the show is working and the audience is enjoying it. There are a few mistakes made along the way, lines dropped here or there, but for the most part the show is running smoothly. The men are not happy when they "screw up" so I have to keep reassuring them how the audience did not notice and how well they did overall. The constant need for encouragement at times affects my own focus and is one of the challenges working as an actor in this context. But I jolly them along, smiling at all times, high fiving, fist bumping and (when the guards are not looking) giving lots of supportive hugs.

The show gets better and better throughout the five weekend run of 13 performances. Audiences keep growing, the reviews are very positive (the local paper's reviewer calls the experience "unforgettable"), and by the time we close the show is a sellout hit. We garner a number of standing ovations. It is always wonderful as an actor to receive these ovations. But it is joyful to be standing on stage with many neophyte inmate performers who have never experienced this kind of public approval.

However, the most powerful aspects of the run for me are the talkbacks. These facilitated post-show conversations with the audience are the inmates' opportunity to answer questions, to hear the audience's responses and to share their thoughts on

what doing this project has meant to them. I take turns with two of the other women performers and the director in facilitating the question and answer periods of 20 min. Regular questions we receive include how the play was created, how it might have changed the men's sense of place on the peninsula, and what the experience had given them. The men's responses are truthful, often self-deprecating but always honest. They express over and over again how much more challenging the process of theatre creation was than they expected. But they also express how the experience has been invaluable to their rehabilitation, their self-confidence and their ability to face members of the public with pride rather than with fear. At times they express their sense of vulnerability as a strength in this context (Brown 2015) and a couple of the men are moved to tears during these conversations. These dialogues for me are the strongest measures of our success.

## 12 Conclusion

The objective of both projects involved men telling their stories through theatre, using a collective playbuilding approach. This reaching 'in' approach to gather the stories provided ownership for the men, and an opportunity to perform a part of themselves to an outside audience. The plays were about giving voice to soldiers and inmates – outlets for themselves, and as importantly for co-participants and audiences to glimpse inside the lives of these men. As teaching artists, we helped to facilitate these projects, but we were also 'inside' the work as co-facilitators and actors. Monica shares the multiple roles she played behind the scenes to motivate, assure, and nurture her fellow actors. The traditional understanding of an actor's role differs tremendously in such projects. George, like Monica, performed a role within *Contact! Unload* alongside his non-actor soldiers. Stepping 'in' the work provides another set of lens, an appreciation of what the group is experiencing during the production. The fear and joy of performing is shared. The lines need to be memorized, the blocking remembered, the focus, the camaraderie, the uncertainty, and the bond is shared 'in' the performing.

Within the two projects described in this article we modeled the kind of creativity and risk-taking we asked of our participants by tackling those tasks ourselves. This inreach model of theatre education and applied theatre requires teacher/facilitator/directors willing to step inside the process and to work alongside participants. We may be somewhat uniquely qualified to take on this kind of inreach education due to our shared background as trained and experienced actors. It does feel risky to set aside the role of mastery that is more typical of a teacher, director or facilitator and to step inside the shared role of performer. However, our experiences in these two applied theatre projects have shown us that we can continue to learn as mentor actors as well as educators/facilitators. Walking alongside these veteran soldiers and prison inmates in support of their performance has given us as much as we hope it has given to these men and to the audiences who witnessed their courage. Stepping out of the shadows and into the light is a metaphor for theatre that holds deep

meaning. That metaphor has greater resonance for us now, as we have reflected upon here after working with these groups of men.

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