

The Play's the Thing for These Kentucky Veterans

Shakespeare with Veterans lets vets connect with each other and their community

By [Mark Ray](#)

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Credit: Holly Stone

“Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more.”

—Henry V, Act 3, Scene 1

On any given Thursday evening, a dozen or more veterans, men and women from every conflict since Vietnam, file into a nondescript conference room in Louisville, Ky.’s Vet Center. They don’t come for therapy or to swap war stories, however. Instead, they come to study and stage scenes from William Shakespeare’s plays.

They’ve been coming for nearly two years, ever since retired Army Col. Fred Johnson convinced [Kentucky Shakespeare](#), America’s longest-running free Shakespeare festival, to launch [Shakespeare with Veterans](#). The organization didn’t take much convincing; it created the

innovative Shakespeare Behind Bars program in 1995 and offers a host of other outreach activities.

Why Shakespeare? “There’s no one that speaks more directly to the warrior’s soul than William Shakespeare,” says Johnson, a veteran of four wars and a bout with PTSD.

The Bard’s connection with veterans extends far beyond such martial works as *Henry V*. The first play the group studied, *The Merchant of Venice*, includes these words from the character Shylock: “If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” Hearing those words, a former Army lieutenant tearfully said he finally understood the motivation of the villager who’d killed his comrades in Vietnam almost four decades before. And with understanding came healing and forgiveness.

Sharing Their Wartime Experiences

“It’s not therapy where we all sit around and talk about the problems we’ve had and what we went through and all that, but it’s a chance to relate,” says Darryl Stewart, an Army buck sergeant who also served in Vietnam. “Through Shakespeare, we find common ground with all our feelings. That makes it therapeutic.”

While there are plenty of therapeutic moments, the sessions are generally lighthearted and upbeat. That’s partly because Kentucky Shakespeare Associate Artistic Director Amy Attaway starts every session with a silly warmup game or two and partly because the vets share an easy sense of camaraderie that stems from their common experience.

The camaraderie includes Attaway, even though she doesn’t have a military background. Stewart recalls the time the group was debating the right way to interpret a particular passage. “Amy was disagreeing with the whole group of us about something, and all of a sudden she just backed up and said, ‘Oh God, I’m in a room full of trained killers, and I’m giving them grief,’” he says. “It was so funny.”

Connecting with civilians is core to the group’s mission. To that end, the members often take their show on the road, performing monologues in the choral style (where multiple speakers share a single speech) at companies, government agencies and colleges.

Stewart’s first performance was at Indiana University Southeast as part of a workshop on suicide prevention. “They asked questions; they were wonderfully receptive,” he says. “And every place we have been, I have been really, really pleasantly surprised at the audience response. It’s been very good.”

Risks Are Worth the Rewards

That doesn't mean it's always easy to go on stage.

"I told Amy when I first came, 'Look, I'm best suited for a nonspeaking role that requires sitting. If I can come on stage and sit down, I'll be fine. Anything beyond that is pushing me,'" Stewart says.

But the rewards are worth the risk to Stewart and Linda Anderson, who had only a passing knowledge of Shakespeare before she joined the group this year. A major who served in the Army Nurse Corps stateside and in Iraq and Afghanistan, Anderson didn't have an easy return to civilian life.

"When I came back from Iraq, I was actually encouraged by command to bring a story back and to tell the story of what it was like there," she says. "I noticed that people didn't really want to hear about it."

Through Shakespeare with Veterans, Anderson has found her audience and her voice. "This gives us a venue for sharing our story to a more receptive audience indirectly," she says. "Now I don't feel like I'm wearing a muzzle."

She also appreciates that Shakespeare with Veterans offers her much of what she misses from her military service, including a common sense of purpose and a devotion to the greater good. "I feel like we're serving because we're representing, and that feels good," Anderson says.

Never has the group represented in a bigger way than when Attaway prompted them to stage a 20-minute excerpt of *Julius Caesar* as the preshow for a Kentucky Shakespeare performance of *Much Ado About Nothing* in July. Stewart was cast as Caesar and was relieved that the play would start after his character's death. "I said, 'This is even better than sitting. This is lying down,'" he recalls.

But then Attaway expanded the production, and "Caesar" had to speak before he was killed. "Getting killed was okay, but the lines.... I'm like, 'Oh my God, I don't know if I can do this,'" Stewart says.

He did it, however, as did 12 comrades in arms. And the audience of some 700 theatergoers responded to the show with a rousing ovation, honoring the vets not just for their performance in Louisville's Central Park theater, but for their service in theaters of war across the globe.

You can see highlights of Shakespeare with Veterans' performances [here](#).



By [Mark Ray](#).

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