



*"Inside Shakespeare for Social Justice" is Marin Shakespeare Company's social media series spotlighting the participants in the SSJ programs, that seeks to expand our virtual community and keep the hope and promise of Shakespeare in prisons alive through these difficult times. While our spring Shakespeare for Social Justice season has been postponed, we want to honor each Shakespeare for Social Justice class for their work toward the planned performance.*

After each Shakespeare for Social Justice performance, students are asked to reflect on what it was like to create a play with their team of fellow actors, and to share their appreciation with one another.

In 2012, Ron Self, an incarcerated veteran, founded "Veterans Healing Veterans - from the Inside Out" in San Quentin State Prison, where he was serving the duration of his sentence. "Veterans Healing Veterans" seeks to provide a safe space for veterans living in incarceration by offering them spaces for community healing and trust, surrounded by their comrades-in-arms. In 2014, Marin Shakespeare partnered with VHV at San Quentin to offer a theater class for veterans, known as Veterans Acting. Through

improv and acting exercises that tap into their creativity and encourage openness and vulnerability, the incarcerated veterans in the group have now created four powerful works of autobiographical theater. These pieces give performers and audience members alike a valuable opportunity to address the shame and stigma of being an incarcerated veteran, as well as taking steps towards healing the trauma that many of those who have served continuously grapple with.

We invite you to join us in celebrating the work of the Veterans Acting theater group, and, in doing so, to consider the wisdom of people who have been in circumstances different than your own.

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## **What do you hope that students receive or achieve through the post-performance appreciation session?**



**T:** I hope the students have a chance to reflect on the enormity of what they've been through together, as they've shared their stories - so many of them traumatic - used those stories to create a script together, and then re-told those stories throughout the rehearsal process, finding new moments, new meaning in each of them. Finding that they are supported and forgiven by people they respect. It's an incredible process, and it's huge, and the

appreciation session allows some time to close the process of that journey, to reflect on it, and to have that reflection with the people who carried them through. I imagine that, especially for those who have served in the military, there's a comfort and familiarity in having gone through it as a team.

**Do you recall anything particularly surprising or compelling that your students have appreciated about one another, whether individually or collectively?**



**T:** Their appreciation of one another is endlessly abundant. We have about 12 students in each performance, and the class is about an hour and a half long. It is never enough time for everyone to share their appreciation for one another. And I guess the striking thing about that is that the appreciation process is really a time of sharing the things they have learned and admire about each individual in the room. If theatre is about walking around in one another's shoes, then the appreciation process focuses that further. It's about empathy, but it's about empathy that leads to a positive understanding of a person - and in this case, because the theatre we are doing is autobiographical, it's about positive understanding of a person that is in the room with them, who they will continue living with, potentially for quite some time.

## What have you grown to appreciate about the participants?

**T:** Individually, they each have impressed me as they share themselves. I think of specific individuals, though it's true in different ways of every student, when I say that I appreciate: their ability to discover humor in some dark stories;

the bravery they've shown - not only during combat, as we associate with Veterans - but also in moments throughout their lives, that show a lifelong pattern of being devoted to putting themselves on the line to help others; their willingness to approach the difficult moments in their past - things in their environments and the choices they've made - first, at all, and moreover with an ability to put blame aside and focus on forgiveness, healing, and the possibility of what good they can create as a counterpoint to their pasts.



## What is something you have learned from the students in your class?

**T:** There is such forgiveness that can occur in such subtle ways. When someone shares what they believe is the worst of themselves, and we all stay in that room together, effectively saying “I have learned this about you, and I will accept that this is a part of you, and I will stay here with you.” We have such dread that if people knew what was in our hearts of darkness, that we wouldn’t be loved, that we would be abandoned by those we love, trust, and respect. In fact, in those times when people have shared the things about themselves that they most fear, others in the group have shown the greatest compassion, and so often it is so simple. A nod, looking at a person with gentleness and curiosity when they expect that you will look away. Showing compassion can be so simple; maybe that’s compassion at its best, actually.



## Is there anything you have learned from the students that has been helpful or supportive to you during this time of crisis?

**T:** Right now, there has been a lot of questioning about how we can be productive with our time, or how we can use this time for self-improvement. What's helped me that I've learned from the students is: when times are tough, the idea of self-improvement can feel like too much. It's not necessarily the best time to better myself. But the act of noticing negative behaviors, thoughts, and habits that I thought I had grown past, but which are coming up again now that I'm feeling anxious or scared, and choosing not to do those things, that's actually more than enough.



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