
The body is the frontline

Rosie Kay, Artistic Director, Rosie Kay Dance Company, reflects on a revival of *5 Soldiers - The Body is the Frontline*, taken on a UK tour to military bases and theatres with a community outreach programme

5 Soldiers - The Body is the Frontline is a dance theatre work, first created in 2010, which as a company, we decided to revisit and revive in 2015. We felt that *5 Soldiers* was still an important work and relevant post drawdown from Iraq and Afghanistan – it was powerful, it looked at a controversial and difficult subject and it had quite simply never gone away from me as a choreographer, with requests to talk and write about the work, including a chapter on War and Choreography to be published by Oxford University Press.

A long period of considered analysis allowed me time to think about the work, which led me to feel that it still had something important to say about the way we train soldiers, the way we think of soldiers and soldiering, and our detachment from this in civilian society. Despite the proliferation of Western and UK troops in action over the past 13 years, there has been remarkably little artistic work made about recent conflicts. I'd stayed in touch with some of the military colleagues I'd worked with in the initial research and touring, and when I approached them with the idea of bringing the work back to life, they all agreed that now might be a very good time for a revival.

The concept of the work set the cast/soldiers in an imaginary waiting area – a hanger or a waiting room, much like many to be found on military bases and camps across the country, and indeed the world; a place to contain and hold (mostly) men, while they wait and prepare to go to battle or return home. Building on this concept, we devised a tour that would not only take in theatres, as before, but



Rosie Kay. Photo: Tim Cross

actually take the work to new sites: a military camp, a working barracks, an army reservist centre and an officers' club.

Our aim was to have more than half of our tour dates in military settings. We toured to eight locations overall with our own theatre set up, even constructing our own raked seating in each unusual performance space. This was particularly effective in the military settings – transforming a huge gym hall or drill hall beyond recognition, and adding to the sense of something unusual and special happening in the base.

We really wanted to make sure that the work connected in new ways to new audiences. We did this in two ways. First, we created a 20-minute outdoor 'teaser' version of the show, performed in each of the towns we visited to raise the company profile

and make it visible to everyone. This radically helped ticket sales. Secondly, I wanted to build on the model I had created for making large-scale Olympic and Commonwealth Games works, that involved dance leader training, commissioning choreographies based on the themes of the work – including the rigours of physical training, warfare, the homefront and those left behind – and wide spread community work, getting people involved who might not usually participate in dance. We intended to work with children and young people on the military bases, often very geographically and socially isolated places, and to link them with young carers groups, dance groups or community groups.

All of these aspects combined to make this the largest and most challenging of all the company's tours. It was certainly designed to develop my practice in many ways, from working with a new and incredibly talented cast (we managed to secure a week's attachment with the 4th Battalion The Rifles for all of them) to presenting work in unusual settings, liaising in each area with the military and building bespoke partnerships in each location.

The tour built on ideas I had developed while working at Oxford University, as the Leverhulme Artist in Residence to the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography. These ideas were concerned with training and leadership and sharing skills and also practice with a team of leaders engaged by the company to deliver outreach work by giving an insight into the choreographic process of the touring >>



Above left: RKDC, York participants, Sergeant Anthony Grimes, 5 Soldiers' community engagement work for York Theatre Royal. Photo: Steven Eric Parker

company.

The subject matter in itself was a challenge and led to a lot of discussion with the dance leaders about their own views and why they would want to be involved with the project. By taking it into military environments we shifted many perceptions, not only within the military about the power of the arts and dance to shine light on difficult subjects, but also through breaking down prejudices from the general public as they were allowed to access areas and a way of life not normally shared with civilians.

Partnerships

This project involved a huge amount of partnership building and nurturing. I had a strong introduction with the Army Welfare Services (AWS) where Colonel Makin took the project on with a personal interest in seeing the effects of our work. This was a vital piece of support that helped us gain access to the AWS nationwide network and its information links. We also had incredible support from General Sir Nick Parker, who also took a personal interest in helping us bridge connections within the military world and open doors at command level. With this support, we secured access to both AWS officers and local commanding officers who were invited to participate in post-show talks. This

was quite an unusual step and allowed representatives of the military to see and then discuss each show, adding their perspective and a sense of authenticity to the performances.

Finding the support of a strong venue, sourcing the right spaces to stage the performance and securing locations to site the outreach work was a complex task. The needs of the military base came first, but ownership and permissions – including building regulations that could allow an audience of up to 200 people – depended on other organisations, including The Reserve Forces' & Cadets' Association and the Ministry of Defence.

Once the location was confirmed, we appointed a dance leader at each of the eight locations, who brought with them a wealth of local knowledge and links with groups they already worked with. In each, we tried to bring local military young people into the project but this proved to be extremely difficult for a variety of reasons: school holidays, age restrictions of the work (12+), transport issues and the pace of change as military drawback from Germany affected many people's lives. Where possible, dance leaders conducted introductory sessions but in the end, only one area (Newcastle) worked exactly as we envisioned due to a very enthusiastic and supportive

AWS officer and a highly dedicated dance leader.

Audiences

Our aim was to get new audiences to see the work together with a more traditional dance and theatre audience. One sign that this was working was the increased attendance at each post show talk, with an average of 60% of the total audience staying to hear the post-show talk with the choreographer, cast and at least one, sometimes more, military representative.

We partnered with York St John University in making sure we captured as many responses as possible, with researcher Professor Matthew Reason conducting in depth interviews and a coordinated focus group. One attendee described the work as “a powerful reflection of the sort of journey that the military goes through.” One veteran, for whom this was the first piece of live dance or theatre he had ever seen, commented: “I thought it was amazing, absolutely amazing and very helpful. I could see what was going on; I could see what was being portrayed and what was going on and everything.”

Impact

For military spectators the performance had particular value in creating what was described as



Above and opposite page right: Sean Marcs, Duncan Anderson, Oliver Russell, Shelley Eva Haden and Chester Hayes – RKDC’s 5 Soldiers. Photos: Tim Cross

a thread of understanding between the military and civilian communities. It was described as having value in bridging communities, as drawing attention and raising awareness, particularly for the manner in which the performance presented a broad sense of the soldiers’ experience, from training and camp life, to combat and injury. For one retired officer its value was in the way it “forces you to sit for, you know, just over an hour and watch representations of the full military experience and reflect on it a bit.”

Lisa Robinson, a community development worker for the AWS in the North East of England, summed up experiences of children of military personnel living on Albemarle Barracks in Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: “Young people from military communities are enthusiastic, intelligent and resilient. Often they are socially and geographically isolated and opportunities for personal and social development are limited, so linking up with the 5 Soldiers project was an incredible experience. Young people from a wide range of backgrounds, and all from service families, enjoyed professional dance tuition and taking part in a curtain raiser performance. The young people also linked up with another group in this unique situation and this has extended their social network and increased their interaction

with the wider local community.”

Robinson continued: “The project has been so well-received that one of the teenage boys is exploring opportunities to become involved with dance more regularly. The project has encouraged young people to become more physically active. The 5 Soldiers project has motivated this community to engage with wider arts provision. It has broadened the outlook of our young people and acted as a creative catalyst.”

Despite excellent connections and endorsement from high command, we certainly felt that at each location we had to prove ourselves; such was the difficulty in grasping the concept of a dance representing the life of a soldier. However, once soldiers and officers saw the work, and the level of detail and understanding portrayed on stage, often barriers were broken down and we were met with a great enthusiasm for what we were trying to achieve. For future tours, we will put in place a briefing day for military and theatre partners to see the work (live or on video) and listen to the experiences of those involved, enabling understanding and bringing everybody onboard at an early stage.

The 5 Soldiers tour and its outreach programme and community engagement work certainly had its challenges, which were dealt with by

a highly experienced and dedicated team made of community engagement manager (Vanessa Oxspring), project manager (James Allenby) and production manager (David Ball), without whom this project would never have been possible. The team understood that we were dealing with a private, at times defensive and by its very nature highly secretive organisation, which can be mistrustful of external representations of their world, often with due reason. We had to earn real trust in order to gain access, and make sure that our work was independent, yet respectful. 5 Soldiers was a fine balance, and a careful one, but an incredibly worthwhile and unique experience for all involved.

5 Soldiers is planning to tour Scotland and the USA in 2016, funding pending.

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Short production trailer:
<https://vimeo.com/126549517>
Outdoor work:
<https://vimeo.com/134477527>
The making of 5 Soldiers:
<https://vimeo.com/134292856>