

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2018 – Unspoken

As a bomb disposal expert doing VIP protection at the Fringe Ken Bellringer never expected to appear there on stage himself.



But this year he is among 15 members of Bravo 22 Company, a military arts based recovery programme, returning to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival with a new cast to perform in the premier of Unspoken– a moving and often funny play which explores the aftermath of trauma and injury.

Unspoken will be dedicated to The Royal British Legion's "Thank You" movement, which aims to thank the whole First World War generation. This includes not only the British and Commonwealth Armed Forces who lost their lives, but also those – military and civilian – who played their part on the home front and those who returned to build a better life for the benefit of generations to come.

After deployment to Afghanistan Warrant Officer Bellringer lost both legs and his genitals, and suffered severe damage to his hands, attempting to save a comrade from a Taliban IED (improvised explosive device).

Unspoken is set in a club where a disparate regiment of soldiers, sailors and airmen have gathered to chat, drink and

watch live entertainment. It reflects the experiences of love, loss, loneliness and hope that are the reality for sick and wounded veterans and their families.

Playwright Gary Kitching interviewed 100 veterans and spouses from Bravo 22 Company to create a piece of theatre that is an honest and unsentimental reimagining of their experiences. The number was symbolic of the centenary of the end of World War I.

Kitching says: "These aren't people who want sympathy. They just want to tell their story and be better understood. People go into the forces and it changes their lives, not always for the worse, far from it. But some are injured – it may be physical and visible or something unseen.

"You get the likes of Ken Bellringer who lost both legs trying to save a comrade. But he says he's still got his brain and his voice and he just gets on with life. There are so many others like him out there.

"I spoke to people all round the country and have tried to reflect their stories and experiences, characters, culture and the challenges they face. And if ever there was a time to think about how much has been endured by so many, it must be the anniversary of the end of the First World War."

Bravo 22 Company's production *The Two Worlds of Charlie F*, performed to sell out audiences at the Fringe in 2012, touring Canada and the UK and winning an Amnesty International Freedom of Expression Award. Unspoken aims to build on this success.

Bellringer, who served in the Royal Logistics Corps, spent around five years based at Edinburgh's Craigiehall Barracks. His roles included searching for explosives ahead of royal and other VVIP visits to the Fringe and at Balmoral.

He was later deployed to Iraq, and then to Afghanistan, where he defused around 60 Taliban devices, helping protect

multinational forces.

During one operation Corporal Loren “Loz” Marlton-Thomas caught his feet in a hole. Bellringer knew it was a concealed explosive that could detonate at any instant. As there was no opportunity to defuse it, Bellringer decided to try to pull his comrade free, hoping it was either a dud or that there would be a delay before it exploded.

Luck was against them. The 28-year-old corporal was killed and Bellringer suffered injuries so severe that even after advanced surgery and care from some of the world’s best medics the chances that he would die were given at 90%.

Nowadays Bellringer is deeply involved with Bravo 22 Company. His big personality and sense of humour have seen him cast as the comedian entertaining in the club. Unable to use prosthetics, he appears in his wheelchair – describing himself as “a sit-down stand up”.

He says: “In the Army I was never really one for the theatre, and when I was doing VVIP work at the Fringe I certainly never thought I’d be there on stage.

“But this is an amazing play, a real rollercoaster. Gary has done a brilliant job of capturing so many people’s experiences and how life is for them. Being on stage and performing it is such a fantastic feeling – the same feeling I got doing the job I loved, and I never thought that would happen again.”

In addition to theatre, Bellringer also uses his time give talks about resilience and to get people thinking and talking about injury. He’s especially determined to break down the barriers to discussing damage or loss of genitals.

He said: “I was fortunate because I already had kids and have an incredibly strong and loving relationship with my wife Chris.

“But for younger men, maybe just in their 20s, it’s terrible. They see all their mates going out, having relationships and – as time goes on – settling down and having families. We have to think and talk about these issues, and it’s not just for people now, but for the future – all the other young men who will suffer this way in future conflicts.”

Unspokenis made possible by The Royal British Legion and The Drive Project, with the support of Newcastle Theatre Royal and actor Ray Winstone who is The Drive Project and Bravo 22 Company’s ambassador.

Winstone said:“This is a play, and a cast, with something important to say. It’s not sentimental, it’s not sugar coated, and it’s very real. It is also superb piece of drama that anyone can appreciate as it’s more generally about life’s struggles and is full of humour and humanity.”

- Pleasance Beyond – Pleasance Courtyard (Venue 33)
- Dates: 21-27 August
- Time 15:15
- Duration 75 mins
- Ticket prices: £7 to £12.50
- Suitability: 14+
- Guidance: sensitive content, traumatic themes and strong language
- Box office: 0207 6091800 or info@pleasance.co.uk
- For more information see the website at www.unspokenplay.com