

Lessons from War: Actors Immerse Themselves in 'Red Badge of Courage'

By Frank S. Costanza (<https://sagharborexpress.com/author/frankscostanza/>) - October 17, 2018

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Ethan Suhr as Henry Fleming in "The Red Badge of Courage"

Thomas Schiavoni Jr. has taken an unusual approach in preparing for his first lead role in boots on the ground theater's upcoming production of "The Red Badge of Courage."

Rather than read the realistic Civil War novel penned by Stephen Crane and first published in 1895, or watch the 1951 film adaptation directed by John Huston, the 14-year-old Pierson High School freshman spent roughly two hours visiting inmates at the Suffolk County Jail in Yaphank.

He said he recently sat down with roughly 30 inmates, all military veterans and most of whom had served in either Iraq or Afghanistan, to learn why they had trouble assimilating back to civilian life after completing their tours.

"My mom suggested it to me, and I thought it would be a good idea," said Thomas, referring to his mother, Southampton Town Justice Andrea Schiavoni, who also serves as the East End Veterans' Court Judge.

Thomas, who is studying the lines for Henry Fleming, a young Union Army private who ends up fleeing the battlefield and later redeems himself with an act of bravery, said he wanted to understand how war and conflict can forever change those who are involved in it.

"I feel like the scary thing is that they're normal people, but when a normal person is put into this situation, it's sort of scary," he said. "There are things they cannot unsee ... "

His mother had actually set up the meeting before learning that Thomas had landed the lead role in “The Red Badge of Courage,” explaining that she thought it would be good for him to learn from the incarcerated veterans. “I introduced Thomas and asked the men to speak with Thomas as they would talk to their younger selves ... and they did,” Schiavoni said.

“They helped me understand him better,” Thomas added, referring to his character, Henry. “I like him in the sense that he pulls himself together in the end, but running from battle is kind of not a good move.”

“The Red Badge of Courage” will be performed at the Southampton Cultural Center every Friday, Saturday and Sunday from October 19 until November 4. A special encore performance, which will be free for veterans and their families, will be offered at 6 p.m. on Sunday, November 4. For tickets and showtimes, please visit [scc-arts.org](http://www.scc-arts.org) (<http://www.scc-arts.org/>).

Thomas will be joined on the center’s stage by a fellow student, 15-year-old Ethan Suhr, who will perform the role of Billy, the flag bearer for Henry’s unit, the 304th New York Regiment. Unlike his teenage counterpart, the Southampton High School freshman said he plans to finish reading the novel before opening night, explaining that he is also getting school credit for his effort.

“I’m mostly doing it for rehearsal, but it’s also my independent reading book,” said Ethan, who tried out for both Henry and Billy. “I recently got the book and I’m finding it really cool because whenever I come across dialogue, it’s like exactly from the script, so it’s really weird when you start reading it.”

Thomas Schiavoni Jr. and Bonnie Grice in “Red Badge of Courage.”

Ethan said he wasn’t disappointed to learn that he was being cast as Billy, noting that it is one of the play’s bigger roles and that his character is featured in all three acts. He’s also excited to read his final line — “Take care of her, Henry,” — after he is fatally wounded and hands off Old Glory to the play’s protagonist.

“Thomas IS our Henry,” said Bonnie Grice, the founder of boots on the ground theater who plays Ma in the fall production. “We knew as soon as we met him. Spirit. Looks. Voice. His love of history. And his dedication.”

Joining the young duo and Grice on stage for the upcoming performances are Richard Adler as Jim, Robert Nelson as the General, Mitch Selden as the Lieutenant, Deyo Trowbridge as Wilson, and Christopher Levi as the tattered colonel. Levi, an Iraq War veteran and Wounded Warrior making his acting debut, is a “natural” and “absolutely brilliant,” according to Grice.

She explained that one of the missions of boots on the ground theater is get student actors on the same stage as adults, and to feature both in prominent roles. In the outfit’s spring production of “The Miracle Worker,” Emma Suhr—Ethan’s younger sister who is now 11—portrayed Helen Keller.

In addition to getting students and adults to share the spotlight, boots on the ground theater is focused on bringing history to life. To that extent, great attention has been given to collecting costumes and props that are true to the Civil War era, and they’ve enlisted Captain Joseph Bilardello, a Vietnam veteran and commander of the 67th New York Civil War Reenactors, as a consultant to offer his insight in the life and struggles of a soldier in 1863. He will also sit on the panel participating in the question-and-answer session that will follow the free student performances.

Additionally, an exhibition of memorabilia, curated by Civil War aficionado Stephen Gould in collaboration with the Southampton History Museum, will be on display in the center’s gallery for the duration of the run. The exhibit will feature a kepi, cartridge box and photos from the Civil War, along with other artifacts and background on Crane. The play is being directed by Josephine Teresi-Wallace.

As for Thomas, he thinks that the message in Crane’s creation, considered by many to be the first great war novel, still resonates today.

“I believe that the story kind of entails how scary and horrific war is for an enlisted man,” he said. “Some soldier stories say that fighting for your country makes you super-proud and honorable, which it does, but on the other hand it is quite scary, and it can leave

stuff in your head.”

Comments

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