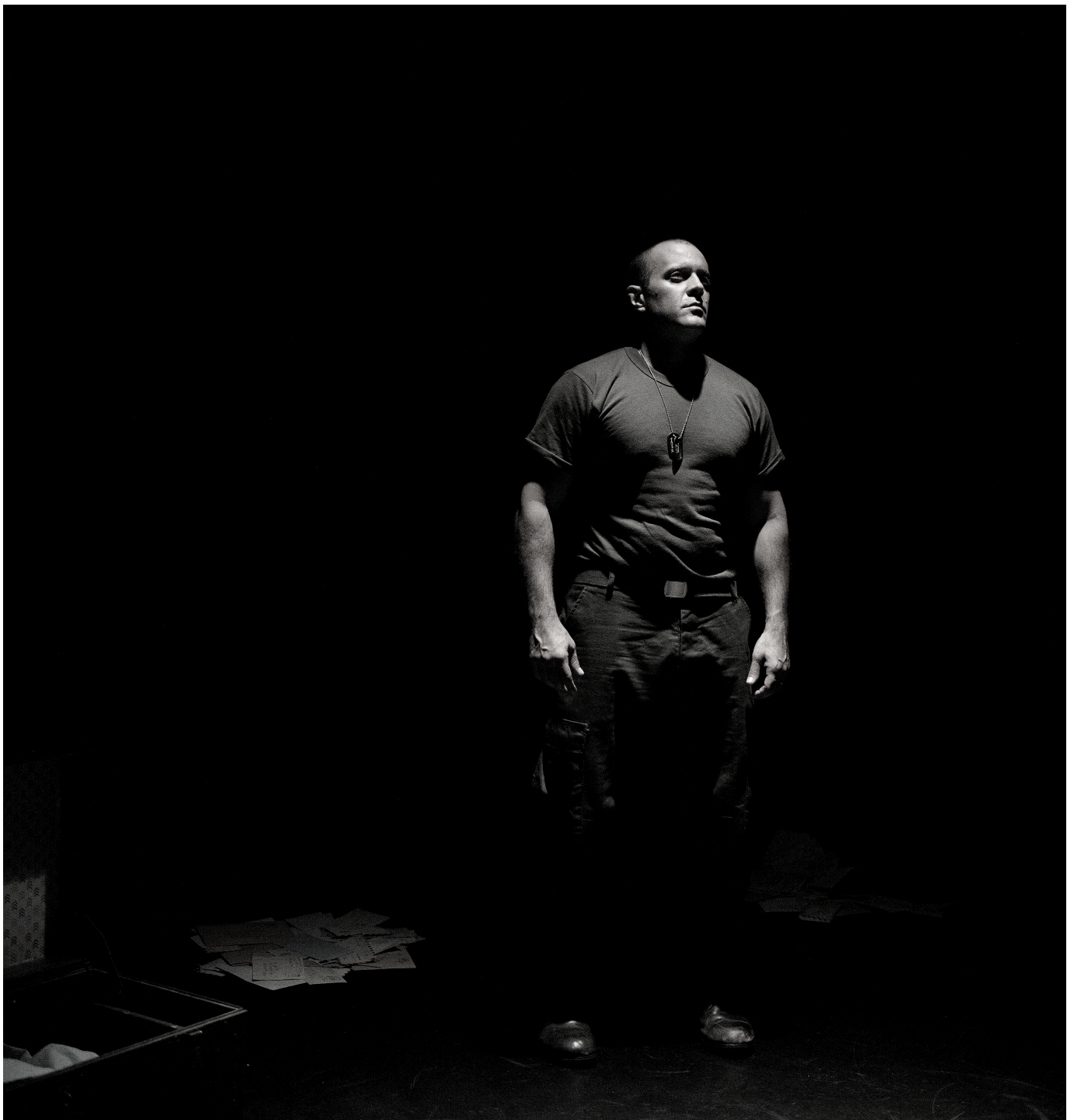


THE RECORD

THE AMERICAN SOLDIER

The American Soldier shines a light on the plight on veteran



By
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Douglas Taurel kept reading about the number of returning vets struggling with post traumatic stress disorder, often leading to suicide, and was devastated.

He'd never served in the military, but the 47-year-old actor couldn't stop thinking about the effects of war on young men and women who serve.

Actor Kevin Dobson served as a military police officer stateside during the Vietnam War era, and when he was a member of the cast of "Kojak," which ran from 1973-78, he was asked to chair a Veterans Day event. He told organizers he'd like to do more.

He hasn't stopped doing for vets, and is responsible for Taurel bringing his one-man show, "The American Soldier," to San Joaquin Delta College's Atherton Auditorium at 7 p.m. Thursday and Friday. Admission is free.

"I saw some of the write-ups and things about the show and told Kevin, 'You have to bring it to Delta,' " said John Ervin, Veterans Resource Center manager at Delta College. "Kevin agreed. Although I served, and it was volunteer service (in the U.S. Navy), at the same time we come to the realization we may not come home the way we left. I deal with a lot of them from the post-9/11 era, which is different from the era I was in. We're dealing with things we've really got to get a handle on as a nation."

Taurel thought so, too.

Ten years ago, the New Jersey-based actor was stunned by the number of suicides by returning veterans. (The numbers continue to be staggering. Three veterans shot themselves in Veterans Affairs facilities in a five-day period in April and the VA reports 20 veteran suicides a day).

"It affected me. I had empathy for it," said Taurel, who has acted on stage, in television and film, including 2018's "The Kindergarten Teacher" with Maggie Gyllenhaal. "I had an idea I wanted to try to do a story to honor veterans."

He started by visiting the New York Public Library to research letters from veterans, dating back to the Revolutionary War.



“The idea was of telling the story of the revolution to remind us why America is so great,” Taurel said. “I looked into the Civil War. I looked into Vietnam. For every war you could find letters.” Writer Craig Lucas (“Prelude to a Kiss”) suggested he make the project a one-man show and not a play.

Six directors turned him down before Padraic Lillis listened to Taurel recite one of the letters. “He loved it,” Taurel recalled. “He said, ‘Do you have any more?’ and I said, ‘Yeah, I’ve got plenty.’ The two pieced together a 20-minute version in 2014 and sought festivals to show it.

His first shot was at the Bowery Poetry Club in New York. “It was a Monday night, Memorial Day weekend, raining and no one was there. I did it for eight people,” Taurel said. “I didn’t think anyone would get it. It was hard to get motivated to do a show for eight people.” He got a standing ovation, people embraced him and shared personal stories of lost loved one.

He and Lillis beefed it up the show to 40 minutes and Taurel’s wife suggested he apply for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Scotland, the Super Bowl of theater festivals.

Taurel had performed there in a Sam Shepherd play once, and was accepted. Prior to leaving for Scotland, he was invited to do his show at New York's 59th Street Theatre, which gives New York plays going to Scotland two nights to try out their work.

Among the audience was a reviewer from the Huffington Post. She loved the piece, and by the time "The American Soldier" got to Scotland, there was buzz about it.

His was one of 100 plays — of 3,500 entries — nominated for an Amnesty International Award, and his show sold out the last week and a half he was there. When he got home there was no slowing down. He's performed it more than 8,000 times in 11 states, including at the Kennedy Center. He's been honored by several veterans groups. It's now 80 minutes and features 14 characters from the American Revolution through today's continuing conflicts.

The similarity in soldiers in all wars is the brotherhood, Taurel said.

"After a while they're not fighting for the country, they're fighting for each other," Taurel said

The second commonality that Taurel found is how poorly returning soldiers have been cared for, either by not being paid what they were promised, or not receiving medical and mental health attention they need.

"We get into a conflict and it's so dramatic, so hard to deal with we want to move past it as a society," Taurel said. "It's harder for the guys who lost friends and brothers in battle. One year they're experiencing violence and chaos and the next they're not."

Once they're home, people like Ervin help guide them through school and direct them to services available to them. Dobson, who as a Hollywood actor has been asked by plenty of organizations to lend his support, chooses to invest his volunteer hours with veterans.

Among his work is serving on the veterans committee of the Screen Actors Guild and American Federation of Television and Radio, which has worked to land qualified veterans jobs in the industry.

Dobson, had heard about Taurel's play but not seen it.

“The idea was to bring ‘The American Soldier’ here to Stockton make the public more aware,” said Dobson, who moved to Stockton two years ago. “Veterans show up for veterans stuff, but I want the public to become more aware of veterans’ plights.

This show ... gives a better understanding of the mindset of being a veteran, being a combat veteran.

The more aware we become, the better our chances of helping veterans get the benefits they need.”

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