

'SCAPE: Breaker's story retold | pictures, photos

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Director Douglass Doherty looks over the script during rehearsals for the production of Breaker Morant. Pictures: Katrina Docking.



At rehearsals are (from left), Corporal Sharp, Cameron Phillips is sworn in by Court Orderly Garry Heazlewood. Pictures: Katrina Docking.

WHEN Douglass Doherty, of Wynyard, served on American ship USNS Comfort during the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991), Australia didn't have a floating hospital like it.

A contingent was deployed from Australia to serve on the ship, which gave unfettered access to soldiers wounded or injured in the battles.

As a naval operating theatre technician, Doherty saw at close quarters and in graphic terms the trauma of war.

"These ships are as big as Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital with 10 operating theatres, 150 casualty beds and 2000 ward beds," Doherty said.



Sergeant-Major Drummit, Peter Winskill, is questioned by Major Bolton, Grainne Hendrey during trial of rehearsals for Breaker Morant. Pictures: Katrina Docking.

Despite his candid views on the fruitless nature of war, Doherty still serves as a captain in the Australian Army Reserve.

"Sometimes the best form of protection is defence," he said.

"I have a need to serve and if we don't have an active army reserve in Tasmania the federal government will spend less on defence than they do. Tasmania already gets the rough end of the stick with respect to defence spending."

He took away from the Gulf "the destructive power of modern weaponry and the futility of conflict."

"As a kid you play at wars and when you shoot your mate they fall down and play dead. If you do it on stage there are no consequence and you don't internalise the damage, or you don't understand," Doherty said.

"In Australia we don't generally see people being shot or blown up; the closest we get is road trauma. When you see it, and when you truly understand the kinetic effect a bullet or an explosion has on the body, it becomes very real."

Doherty saw a man who was shot by a 50-calibre machinegun.

"I remember thinking we shoot holes in the side of ships with 50-calibre machineguns," he said.

"Another fellow had fallen out of a helicopter and had multiple fractures. A man was run over by a tank ...

"A boiler blew up injuring a number of men who had major burns.

"These were all young men."

Doherty said that at the time of the Gulf War, Australia had not been involved in a major conflict since Vietnam and was not as used to seeing soldiers go to war as today.



Corporal Sharp talks over his lines with director Douglass Doherty.

"We've rotated something like 20,000 people in the last 10 to 15 years serving in the Middle East," he said.

It's the reason the amateur theatre buff and his wife Maureen said they felt compelled to self-fund their own upcoming Burnie theatre production of Breaker Morant, to raise money for charity Soldier On, which is helping Australia's wounded soldiers.

"I wanted to do something during the Centenary of Anzac to raise awareness and to be a fundraiser for Soldier On," Doherty said.

He said the Boer War, with the formation of the Australian Commonwealth in 1901, became the country's first military involvement as a nation and Australia's contribution was significant. Doherty said the Breaker Morant story went to the heart of war's futility.

"It's also about the concept of following orders and the question of whether those orders were lawful or not. The thin line between soldiering and murdering raises questions that are timeless," he said.

"Only about six years ago we were court martialing soldiers for killing non-combatants," he said.

Doherty said from the Boer War to contemporary military service, Tasmania had traditionally contributed more service men and women per capita than any other locality.

He said in the North-West region, you only needed to look at any cenotaph in any country town to see the names of soldiers that represented whole families and football teams who signed up to serve - and perhaps two came back.

"These days we're good at repatriating bodies but in those days they never came home and you wonder if society would ever cope with that again," Doherty said.

He said when contemporary service people came home it was important to give them the support of an organisation like Soldier On.

"The RSL does a good job but it's been shown that contemporary veterans need a different type of support," Doherty said.

"I've served in the (army) reserve with two soldiers dealing with post-traumatic stress syndrome ... what some people might not realise is that many of the contemporary veterans among us are reservists.

"Generally they are younger than 40 and when they come home after being in the Middle East for six to eight months they get a couple of weeks' paid leave and go back to their normal job."

Doherty's day job is chief executive officer of Family Based Care Association North West Inc. With a workforce of 230, it is one of the biggest not-for-profit organisations in the state.

He's been involved with the defence forces since 1983 and joined the cadets at school. He saw the military as a good career move to set his life up.



Major Thomas, Rodney Greene questions Sergeant-Major Drummit, Peter Winskill during trial for rehearsals for Breaker Morant. Pictures: Katrina Docking.

Doherty has also been a member of the Tasmanian Veterans Advisory Council.

After he moved to the North-West, one of his passions in his spare time has been amateur theatre.

He performed in a number of the successful musicals the region has a reputation for but has also felt a strong desire to see more drama staged.

Doherty has taken on the task of producing and directing Breaker Morant and is in rehearsal to open later this month.

Doherty said the Breaker Morant story resonated with him as a returned service person.

Lieutenants Breaker (Harry) Morant, Peter Handcock and George Witton were executed in 1902 for murdering 12 Boer prisoners. The debate over the fairness of the court martial and execution was revived in 1980 by the Bruce Beresford film Breaker Morant.

Defenders of the men say they were made scapegoats of the British and had acted on orders.

After seeing some of the reaction to his film, Beresford reportedly said that it never pretended the men weren't guilty.

"It said they are guilty. But what was interesting about it was that it analysed why men in this situation would behave as they had never behaved before in their lives. It's the pressures that are put to bear on people in war time ... Look at all the things that happen in these countries committed by people who appear to be quite normal. That was what I was interested in examining. I always get amazed when people say to me that this is a film about poor Australians who were framed by the Brits," Beresford said.

For his production, Doherty has invited Jim Uncles, a military lawyer and Australia's foremost expert on the Breaker Morant story, to talk at each performance about its significance and where it fits in history.

"Jim Uncles' quest is to have another inquiry to see if he can get (Harry Morant) exonerated or have the conviction overturned," Doherty said.

"I think there were errors in law from what I know of the original court martial and I think that it warrants an inquiry."

Doherty's financial commitment to stage the play has not been insignificant, but he said he was not worried about recovering the \$5000 budget.

"If we sell 500 tickets to the five shows we should make about \$8000 and \$4000 should go to Soldier On," he said.

"Maureen and I have already decided our costs are sunk ..."

Doherty wanted to stage the courtroom drama in a backspace theatre location where the audience would feel like it was in the court.

He chose the Burnie Uniting Church Hall, which comes with additional technical difficulties associated with getting the stage lighting in and a stage built.



Trooper Botha, Ashley Morgan-Meeks is questioned in court. Picture: Katrina Docking.

Doherty described his directorial debut as "absolutely terrifying".

"Not because I don't think I can direct people; because I feel like I am solely responsible for the success or failure of this venture," he said.

"If it fails, I let down all the players, the playwright, Jim Uncles, the audience and I let down the memory of Morant, Hancock and Witton.

"I have asked my wife what has ever possessed me to do this and she just smiles and says doing a play is like getting pregnant.

"She said, 'you are pregnant now and there's nothing you can do except to do everything to give birth to a healthy baby' and that's what I'm trying to do."

Breaker Morant presented by DoMaur Productions - directed by Douglass Doherty, is on at Burnie Uniting Church Hall, August 21,22, 28 and 29 at 7.30pm and August 23 at 1.30pm. Tickets \$20/\$15 concession available from Not Just Books, phone 6431 9039 and Wynyard Council offices, phone 6443 8311. Proudly supporting Soldier On.

The story ['SCAPE: Breaker's story retold | pictures, photos](#) first appeared on [The Advocate](#).