

Article

Empathy and Listening in Research-Based Theatre

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Abstract: This article shares excerpts from the playscript *Unload*, which brings to life research on military veterans and the lived experience of civilians carrying trauma. Co-developed by veterans, artists, researchers, and counsellors, the play follows a veteran's journey to overcome challenges in and out of uniform and sees him guide a civilian friend through unspoken grief that has been haunting him for decades. This research-based play artistically synthesizes extensive data collected from focus groups, interviews, and surveys conducted with veterans, artists, counsellors, and audiences involved in a five-year research project. This article begins by situating the research-based play within the literature on theatre and empathy. Then, alongside excerpts from the playscript, the authors, who were co-writers of the script and members of the cast, offer insights gleaned from the performance of *Unload*.

Keywords: research-based theatre; empathy; listening; trauma; therapy



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The human heartbeat serves as the red thread through any theatrical labyrinth and will lead to vulnerability at the centre of the event.

—Anne Bogart (2007), *And Then, You Act*

We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know.

—Carl Rogers (1995), *A Way of Being*

“We all have things we need to unload”, says the actor playing a Canadian military veteran in *Unload*, a research-based theatre (RbT) play that explores trauma and loss. RbT is an interdisciplinary research approach that lives in the space between research and art (Cook 2024; Nichols et al. 2022; Summers 2023; Shigematsu et al. 2021, 2022). Similar to other arts-based methodologies, RbT asks how the art form (theatre) can be integrated within all aspects of a study: RbT practitioners frame research questions narratively, use playwriting as a means of data analysis, and engage in knowledge exchange through performance (Belliveau and Lea 2016, pp. 5–6). This article shares excerpts from the script of *Unload*, which brings to life research on veterans and the lived experience of civilians carrying trauma.

Unload is informed by diverse sources, including the Veterans Transition Network, a Canadian charity that supports veterans' transition home after service through various programs, including individual counselling and group therapy (Veterans Transition Network n.d.; Westwood and Wilensky 2005). The research-based play artistically synthesizes extensive data collected from focus groups, interviews, and surveys conducted with veterans, artists, counsellors, and audiences involved in a five-year research project (Belliveau and Lea 2020). The heart of the play invites audiences to witness a dramatized version of a group therapy model where individuals unload some of their “baggage”, or trauma, to move forward with their lives. As of 2023, over 1800 veterans have participated in

the Veterans Transition Network's programming, including a group therapy program for returning Canadian military personnel ([Veterans Transition Network 2020](#)).

We, the authors (Christina, George and Luke), co-wrote and performed *Unload* with other members of the [UBC Research-Based Theatre Lab \(n.d.\)](#). The play's central characters are named Steven and Chuck and include aspects of both authors' lived experiences, but all of the characters in the script are composites and based on multiple sources. We begin by situating the research-based play within the literature on theatre and empathy. Then, alongside excerpts from the playscript, the authors offer a brief critical commentary, sharing insights gleaned from the performance.

Empathy on Stage and in the Therapy Room

Playwright Sarah [Ruhl \(2014\)](#) proposes that one motivation for going to the theatre is to identify, even if only momentarily, with those on stage. Theatre director Anne [Bogart \(2007, p. 65\)](#) defines basic empathy as the "ability...to transfer...your own feelings and emotions" to another, an integral aspect of the actors' and the audience's understanding of characters and narrative. Bogart goes on to write that basic empathy should be only a starting point for theatre productions, and similarly, theatre artist Robert LePage asks, "Should [the emotion] be in the soul and the chest and the heart of the actor? Or should it be in the room, the audience?" ([Theatre Museum Canada 2009, 3:35](#)). Decades earlier, theatre director and playwright Bertolt [Brecht \(1964, p. 71\)](#) had derided theatre that allowed audience members to be uncritical, feeling spectators "by means of simple empathy". Scholars in RbT point to the possibility that, for some audience members, empathy may lead to assumptions around the likeness between character and audience ([Belliveau and Nichols 2017](#)). When viewed in this light, simple empathy may allow the erasure of the lived experiences of minorities, skipping over the challenging and continual work of confronting privilege and historical and systemic experiences of discrimination ([Baer et al. 2019](#)). Whereas the theatre representation that promotes mere likeness collapses individual and group differences and does little more than garner tolerance, Ruhl's search for a theatre that supports identification suggests RbT's ability to engage in deeper empathy and combat erasure and anti-diversity.

In the realm of psychology, in the mid-twentieth century, the work of Carl Rogers broke with psychoanalysts and behaviouralists by centring deep empathy as an essential aspect of the therapeutic process. [Rogers \(2007, p. 234\)](#) described deep empathy as the ability "to sense the client's private world as if it were your own, but without ever losing the 'as if' quality". This kind of empathy is integral to the therapeutic relationship, but, like the theatre artists above, some suggest it is only a starting point from which the therapeutic process can grow ([Fosha 2005](#)). Like theatre artists Bogart and LePage, Rogers argued that if a therapist's empathy is not communicated to the client in a way they can understand, it is meaningless in therapeutic work. Rogers' work fundamentally altered our understanding of what therapy looks and feels like. Today, empathy is a core skill in training future therapists in North American graduate programs, and it may be a common factor contributing to counselling efficacy across diverse approaches, from psychodynamic to cognitive behaviour therapy ([Wampold and Imel 2015](#)).

Empathy, however, may take a different light when considering men's mental health. Contemporary North American notions of normative masculinity tend to emphasize strength, stoicism, and emotional disconnection, particularly among military veterans ([Mejía 2005](#); [Shields et al. 2017](#)). When working with some men in the counselling room, counsellors and clients may view empathy that engenders shared emotional expression as an act of protesting such gender norms. Here, scholar-artists Pamela [Baer et al. \(2019\)](#) define the concept of "startling empathy" as "moments of" realization and "recognition and understanding" into "the life of another". Empathy as a startling disruption or protest can counteract the restrictions of normative masculinity; there is an element of surprise at finding oneself engaging with another's feelings and experience that is unsettling to the self.

From a hybrid theatre-therapy perspective, we can add embodiment to the concept of startling or disruptive empathy. All the veterans and many of the theatre artists who

took part in *Unload* have participated in therapeutic enactment (TE), an approach to group therapy that invites participants to physically act out and embody aspects of trauma memories while taking on a new, empowered role. These new roles are witnessed by the other group members, who serve as collaborators in acting out memories and audience members to each other's growth through role exploration. TE borrows many elements of theatre and acting, from tableaux creation to role play, and brings them into a therapeutic space. Therapy group participants, actors in the case of *Unload*, physically inhabit a playing space of empathic understanding, felt through the experiential, collaborative embodiment of group members' narratives.

In the remainder of the article, we explore four excerpts from *Unload* alongside insights gained from performance, viewing empathy as an act of disruption, protest, and healing. The first excerpt, from the initial moments of the play, introduces us to the actors Chuck, a military veteran, and his friend, Steven, an actor.

Excerpt 1: How About You Try Acting That?

Lights up on CHUCK, carrying in a stack of chairs. He sets them at the back of the playing space, trying to get the position and distance between them exactly right.

STEVEN ENTERS, breathless, with audition pages and a bike helmet.

CHUCK freezes for a moment, then realizes who it is.

STEVEN. Hey Chuck, so sorry I had to drop off—

CHUCK. You're late, you said you'd be here at 1900 h—

STEVEN. You know I find that military clock confusing—

CHUCK. I'm about to start the group.

STEVEN. Traffic was terrible today—

CHUCK. Weren't you on your bike?

Small beat.

STEVEN. Thanks for agreeing to read my audition script with me.

CHUCK. Didn't you hear what I said? I'm going to start—

STEVEN. Come on, man, I don't get a lot of auditions like this, this could be a huge part for me. Just fifteen minutes. Please?

CHUCK. *(after a beat)* It's for a movie?

STEVEN. A new TV show. It's called *The Kill Job*.

CHUCK. (*sarcastic*) Sounds great.

STEVEN. I know! And I thought, you're the perfect person to read it with.

CHUCK. Is that so?

STEVEN. I'm auditioning for Colonel Bob, and you're gonna read Soldier Number 3.

CHUCK. (*reading pages, sighing*) Soldier Number 3. . . I don't even have a name? What am I, a Redshirt on *Star Trek*?

STEVEN. What?

CHUCK. Shouldn't an actor know this shit? *Star Trek*. Redshirt. The guy who dies first, soon as they beam down to an alien planet.

STEVEN has started to warm-up for the scene with gusto. CHUCK stares at him.

CHUCK. What the hell are you doing?

STEVEN. Getting into character.

CHUCK. Oh boy.

STEVEN. (*reciting memorized directions from the script*)

"Ext. wartime scene.

Colonel Bob and Soldier #3 in a tense battle. They are surrounded on all sides".

Awkward pause. STEVEN looks at CHUCK expectantly.

CHUCK. . . . So what? You just want me to read this?

STEVEN. Yeah, whenever you're ready.

CHUCK (*reading, flat*) "Solider #3: Sir, we're outnumbered. We've lost five of our unit to enemy fire. What do we do?"

STEVEN. (*really acting it*) "Soldier, I need you to secure the perimeter".

CHUCK *says nothing*.

STEVEN. Chuck, it's your line.

CHUCK. (*reading, flat*) "They're shooting right at us".

STEVEN. Hey, um, that was great, but do you mind giving me more energy?

Is that how you'd say it if you were, you know, over there, in the heat of battle?

CHUCK. Well, I don't think I'd say this if I was "over there" in the "heat of battle".

STEVEN. Okay, what if we take it again from the top—

CHUCK. First off, this script is totally unrealistic.

Second, what makes you think you would ever know what it was like?

You have no idea what it means to "secure a perimeter" or "to be shot at".

There's a saying: "You can't know until you've supped from the same cup".

Unless you've been there.

You want this role, right?

You want to know what it was actually like?

(*beat*)

Being shot at is a rush.

When you're in a fire-fight, the enemies right there, and you're giving a fire control order:

"CONTACT! RAPID FIRE!"

Holy shit—rounds are coming down, adrenaline's pumping, no time to think, no time to be terrified.

It's awesome!

I fucking loved it.

I loved being deployed.

I loved the adventure.

When you're back home, there's nothing like it.

I miss it.

I know it's ridiculous to say but—

I miss it.

CHUCK *hands the script back to STEVEN*.

CHUCK. So how about you try acting that?

The epigraph from Rogers that begins this article asks us to consider what it is to listen. Listening is vital in the therapy room, on stage, and whenever we are in relation to another. In this excerpt, the character of Steven, a professional actor, no doubt thinks that he is listening to Chuck. But ironically, his desire to quickly gain insight for his audition prevents him from hearing what Chuck is saying about his experiences of serving. The empathetic connection between the two characters is missing. As Chuck says in the following excerpt, Steven is trapped in “make-believe”, whether reciting lines from the script or interacting with his friend, he seems always to be performing a mere likeness. It appears that, with a more profound empathy absent, identification is also missing from the interactions of these characters.

Several of the lines from this excerpt and throughout the script are intended to be comedic. As audience members coming to a show about post-traumatic stress disorder and trauma, we may not be expecting to laugh. When we share laughter, we are listening, we are relating. The characters may not be hearing one another, but through our laughter, as audience members, we are hearing both characters and in an empathic relationship with them. Laughing may be startling, unsettling our experience as a detached audience and moving us beyond simple empathy to deep empathy and identification.

Excerpt 2: Hey, Dude, It's Your Line

STEVEN. Whoa! Wow!

The action, the rush. . .with everything you're saying, I think I'm starting to get it.

CHUCK. Oh really? (*shaking his head*) Your world is all about make-believe.

Look, you better get outta here, I gotta start my group.

STEVEN. What group is this?

CHUCK. Jesus, Steven! What the hell? It's Tuesday night, 7:30. I've been running the same support group for vets ON TUESDAY NIGHTS AT 7:30 for the last five years. What the hell did you think I was doing?

STEVEN. Are you serious? Vets? This is perfect! Could I stay and observe you guys?

CHUCK. No.

STEVEN. What if I did my audition for them and asked them for tips? (*reciting memorized lines*)

“Soldier, I am giving you a direct order—do not throw that medical pack—
(*reciting directions*)

“A charged beat. COLONEL BOB tends to his wounds”.

(*dramatically acting wounded, then reciting another of his lines*)

“No! You need to keep it for yourself. . .I. . .I can't lose another good soldier”.

CHUCK. Bullshit. Bullshit! This is some Hollywood fantasy.

“Lose another good soldier”.

(holding up the script) This is the shit people binge-watch on Netflix, and it’s just—fucking fake.

(beat)

Listen, Steven:

I lost a buddy of mine.

It was Afghanistan 2008, 2009 tour—we were in Sangin Valley, Helmand Province.

We got in a fire-fight—we got ambushed.

Another section came under attack.

I had to bring the boys up to the line.

We get there, rounds skipping off the rocks, it’s pretty fucking tasty.

The other section’s got a man down, they’re calling for a casevac.

I get there, and a buddy of mine’s laying on the ground.

Medics already got a pack on his head.

I know he hasn’t got much of a chance with a head wound.

I grab a couple of my boys, we lift him up, get him out of there. . .

. . . The last thing I saw were the soles of his boots.

CHUCK and STEVEN are on separate sides of the playing space—as if there is a great distance between them. STEVEN looks uncomfortable.

STEVEN. Hey Chuck, I never knew you lost someone close to you like that.

I’m—sorry.

CHUCK nods. STEVEN is about to say more but stops himself, and then shifts abruptly.

STEVEN. You know what, your group’s gonna be here soon.

I should probably head out—(getting ready to leave, taking the script back from CHUCK)

But you’ve helped me a lot for my audition, you know, sharing your story, I’m really getting it. . .

CHUCK. Really? Are you? Really?

Listen, I’ve been back ten years.

And still, sometimes, I think, “None of this is real”.

I’ll be in the mall, and I’ll see all these people shopping—they’re buying three-hundred-dollar shoes, thousand-dollar purses.

And I think to myself, “They don’t have a clue”.

Who cares if your Starbucks coffee isn’t 180 degrees? Fuck you.

(grabbing the script from STEVEN)

This shit isn't real either—

(reading from the stage directions)

"A grenade is thrown, but he swings it away with his gun like a baseball bat".

Who wrote this crap?

(reading from the script)

"Sir hold on just a little bit longer".

(a shift—CHUCK is impacted by this and keeps reading the script)

"It's not your time. I don't want you to go".

(beat)

"I don't want you to go".

(pause)

Hey, dude, it's your line.

STEVEN has been captivated by CHUCK and resumes his line.

STEVEN. *(reciting lines)* "I have one last order for you. . . When you get home, you gotta promise me, you're gonna live. I mean, really live. Every day. No matter what you lose here. Can you do that?"

CHUCK. *(reading from the script)* "Yes, sir. I'm gonna live. . . every day".

Pause. CHUCK and STEVEN are connected for a moment, as the characters in the script.

CHUCK. Maybe this script isn't complete crap, Steven.

But you can't "play" a soldier's story—

It's gotta be your own.

Good luck with your audition.

CHUCK hands STEVEN the script.

STEVEN. You know—I lost someone too. . .

CHUCK. Hmmh?

STEVEN. My brother.

For a moment, STEVEN seems off-balance—but then he steadies himself.

STEVEN. Sorry, I didn't mean to—

CHUCK. Hold on. . .you lost a brother?
How come you never told me?

STEVEN. There's nothing to tell, really. It was a long time ago. (*hesitating*)
It sounds like, I don't know, maybe it's like this for you too—
His face, his voice, is right there—just right there sometimes. . .I see him, hear him. . .
But thanks for all your help, man, I appreciate it.
I'm gonna nail this audition. (*going to exit*)

CHUCK. Hey, hey—wait. You wanna stay? We can make room for you tonight.

STEVEN. To observe the group?

CHUCK. No, no one gets to sit around and observe.
It's a group counselling session, no one gets to be a tourist.
This is where we come to drop some baggage.

STEVEN. Baggage?

CHUCK. Unload some shit we're carrying.

STEVEN. No thanks. I'm not a veteran—you're the ones with the real shit to deal with.

CHUCK. Dude, you don't have to be a soldier to suffer from an injury.

STEVEN. Sure, but mine is not really an injury. It's life.

CHUCK. All of us experience loss.
(*taking a different approach*)
Listen, in the military, they teach us to trust each other. Rely on one another.
In that same spirit, I've got your back. You know that, right?

STEVEN. Yeah, I guess.

CHUCK. Then trust me!
The shit I've done in this group has been the hardest stuff I've ever had to do.
And it's changed my life. For the better.

STEVEN. Really?

CHUCK. Yeah. It has.

Pause.

STEVEN. I don't think I'm ready.

Several VETERANS ENTER from the audience, interrupting STEVEN and CHUCK.

CHUCK turns to welcomes them, but turns back to STEVEN for a moment—

CHUCK. Stay.

In the second script selection, Chuck shares the memory of losing his friend while in service, and this reaches Steven in a new way. This moment of empathic connection acts as a disruption, as Steven stops rehearsing for his audition and offers a hesitant revelation: he has suffered the trauma of loss as well. The characters' moment of connection over their mutual experiences of grief and loss is the turning point at which Chuck and Steven begin hearing each other. As we will see through the rest of the script, between these two characters, listening begets listening; empathy begets empathy.

In inviting Steven to stay and participate in the therapy group, Chuck encourages him to challenge entrenched North American societal norms surrounding normative masculinity and emotional processing while normalizing experiences of loss and the need to process such experiences. Chuck uses language acceptable to normative masculinity to subvert it: "injuries", "shit", "suffer", and "baggage"—these are physical words, but Chuck uses them to refer to emotional wounds. The above selection also demonstrates that without permission to express emotions, Steven's empathy is limited—he changes the subject and goes to leave rather than stay in the emotional conversation around the shared experiences of loss.

In the third excerpt below, *Unload* moves TE from behind the closed doors of a fictionalized therapy room to invite other veterans in group therapy. In productions of the script, the individuals who enter are a mixture of actors, military veterans, and community members who have agreed to participate and rehearsed the scene. In the excerpt below, the characters of Tracy and Sam, participants in the therapy group, are played by an actor and a community member, respectively.

Excerpt 3: We've All Got Shit We Carry

CHUCK. You know, we come here to find hope.

Work through the injuries and try and heal with the support of others.

(to STEVEN)

What was your brother's name?

STEVEN. Really, I'm okay.

SAM. We're here for each other, buddy.

TRACY. We've all got shit we carry.

SAM. Doesn't matter whether you're a veteran or a civilian.

TRACY. Or, even a fucking ACTOR!

STEVEN. My brother. . .my brother's name was Don. Short for Donald.

CHUCK. His name was Don. Tell us about him.

STEVEN. Don dreamed of being a fighter pilot in the Canadian Air Force.

Eighteen years old, and he aced his aptitude test, the fitness component. . .but he didn't have 20/20 vision, so they wouldn't take him.

He found other ways of chasing that. . .rush, the adventure.

He started rock climbing, ice climbing, mountain climbing.

At 27, he was the first Canadian to peak Mt. Tilicho, one of the most challenging mountains in the Himalayas.

A few months after that trip, he came to visit in Toronto, where Sue and I were living at the time.

It was his birthday, and we bought him a . . .

STEVEN seems lost in his memories for a moment.

A headlamp. For his climbs.

That night, he told us this story of a solo overnight climb he did a year or so ago.

He said he never shared this story with anyone, cause it felt *too real*.

He was nearing the peak of Mt. Columbia in the Rockies.

It was almost nightfall, and he was ready to put his pack down and settle for the night.

Then it's as if the floor dropped under him.

He started sliding, holding on to his backpack for dear life.

He had no idea if he slid ten feet or a hundred feet.

Ten seconds or a hundred seconds.

All he knew was that when he regained consciousness, it was morning.

When I heard that story, I felt like such an idiot. . .giving him a headlamp.

He needed more than a headlamp.

CHUCK. (*echoing*) He needed more than a headlamp.

STEVEN. . . .Four months after that visit in Toronto,

I get a message from Don on my answering machine, remember. . .
The ones that record right onto a tape?
Anyway, it's Friday, January 27th, 1995.
Don leaves this message telling me he's going for a climb. Alone.
His friends bailed. I don't think anything of it. . .
I figure I'll call him when he gets back on Sunday—no answer.
Monday afternoon, his boss calls—Don hasn't showed up for work.
He's not picking up his home phone.
And then. . .and then the Park Rangers began their seven-day search.
It would have taken me two minutes to call him back that Friday.
Two minutes to check in.
I just wish I had called him back.
I um. . .I can't seem to get rid of that tape from the answering machine.
I've kept it with me all these years.
Sometimes the words, seem to play on a loop.

CHUCK. Steven, I'm hearing that you really regret not having that conversation with Don. You deserve to have talked to him on the phone, so that's what we'll do.

STEVEN. Now?

CHUCK. Yeah, right now. Are you ready to call him back?

STEVEN. I. . .I think so.

CHUCK. Okay, before we begin, I want you to choose someone to play your brother.

STEVEN. (*asking TRACY*) . . .Could you?

CHUCK. You up for that, Tracy?

TRACY. Sure.

CHUCK. Okay, come and join us up here.

Now, Steven, I'm going to ask you to call your brother.

Throughout the following, CHUCK quietly feeds lines to TRACY/DON. To begin the therapeutic enactment, CHUCK hands TRACY/DON a headlamp, who wears it and turns it on. It's the same one from the beginning of the play. During the TE the lights may dim.

CHUCK. You've dialed Don's number on Friday, and he picks up.
What would you like to say to him?

STEVEN. Hey Don—
Your message said you were heading to the mountains—
On a two-day climb. . . Going on your own?

CHUCK quietly feeds lines to TRACY/DON.

TRACY/DON. Going solo, that's right.

STEVEN. Are you sure that's a good idea?

CHUCK feeds lines to TRACY/DON.

TRACY/DON. I know what I'm doing. I'll be fine. Don't worry about me.

STEVEN. But I am worried about you.

CHUCK. *(prompting STEVEN)* And I am worried about you because. . .

STEVEN. *(with hesitation)* I am worried about you because you're my only brother. . .and I don't want to lose you.

CHUCK feeds lines to TRACY/DON.

TRACY/DON. And I will always be your brother, and adventure is part of who I am.

But before I go, I need you to do something for me.

STEVEN. What's that?

CHUCK feeds lines to TRACY/DON.

TRACY/DON. I'm so proud of everything you've accomplished, everything you are. But I need you to make sure you really *live*—every day.

Can you do that for me?

STEVEN. Yes.

CHUCK. (*to STEVEN*) Anything else you'd like to say to him?

STEVEN. I'm lucky to have a brother like you.
I miss you.

TRACY/DON. I was really lucky to have you too.
Good-bye, brother.

What does it mean to listen? What does it mean to listen with one's whole body? The above selection demonstrates embodied empathy in action as part of a healing process. A core offering of both RbT and TE is that community members may experience new levels of empathic understanding through tools and exercises usually reserved for actors: role-play, dialogue, and embodied imaginative play. Theatre is rife with examples of plays in which characters speak to ghosts, and various therapeutic techniques may allow group members to enact a conversation with an individual that they were never able to have in real life. Embodied imaginative play allows us to embody such communications and offers the possibility of experiencing empathy for the person we are remembering and even, perhaps, to feel empathy from the person we remember. When such imaginative play is witnessed in a group therapy setting or by an audience in a theatre, the witnesses too may follow the thread of empathy and experience new, startling levels of connection to the narrative and the individuals sharing it.

Excerpt 4: You Gotta Promise Me

CHUCK. So what do you think?

STEVEN. How did you know that I was still holding on to something?

CHUCK. I didn't. I wasn't certain, anyway. But we all have things we need to unload sometimes.

STEVEN. Yeah. . .

CHUCK. How did that crap go again? Your lines from the script?
"You gotta promise me—"

STEVEN. (*from memory*) "You gotta promise me, you're gonna live. I mean, really live—"

CHUCK. (*from memory*) "Live every day".

STEVEN. "No matter what you lose here".

CHUCK and STEVEN. "Can you do that for me?"

STEVEN *nods and smiles. They hug.*

CHUCK. (*looking at his watch*) Well, I've got a dinner at 2100 h.

STEVEN. Do you *have* to use the twenty-four-hour clock all the time?

CHUCK. (*smiling*) Nah, I'm just messing with you. I'll see you later, man.

CHUCK *puts a hand on STEVEN'S shoulder, then EXITS.*

Unload offers an illustration of embodied empathy as an act of disruption, protest, and healing and suggests that empathic understanding is continuous and ongoing. Chuck's group happens every Tuesday night. Empathic insight into the experience of another is a circular process, and empathy, like theatre, is ephemeral and always changing. We must keep actively returning to re-experience it, and in our re-experiencing of empathy, it is never the same twice.

Unload was developed after several years of collaboration among veterans, counsellors, and theatre artists working together at the University of British Columbia. In many ways, the relationships that developed between the veterans and the theatre artists mirror the ways we see the characters of Steven and Chuck interacting in the script. At the start of their working relationship, the veterans and artists were searching for common ground, and the theatre artists operated from the assumption that the veterans would offer their narratives while the theatre artists would offer their skill in shaping these narratives into a play. Over the years, as the veterans themselves became peer-leaders in therapy groups for returning military personnel, it became clear that the veterans were not only offering their stories to the theatre artists but also giving them tools to explore loss and trauma as well. *Unload* attempts to capture all the generosity and empathy that such an offering entails, like when space is created to, as Chuck says, "unload some of the shit" we are all carrying.

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