

INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN LANG

November 13, 2014



The afternoon of November 13, 2014, I had the pleasure to interview actor, Stephen Lang at AMVETS Post 49 in Cedar Falls, Iowa. Mr. Lang was in town to perform his one-man play, *Beyond Glory* at the Gallagher-Bluedorn Performing Arts Center (GBPAC) on the campus of the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, Iowa later that evening. This interview was part of the GBPAC's community outreach program. All military veterans received a free ticket to the show. As a veteran of the U.S.A.F., I was looking forward to the show and meeting the man that would be representing and honoring eight Medal of Honor winners that evening. As a Theatre professor, I was also looking forward to this specific interview to gain insight regarding Mr. Lang's creative process with *Beyond Glory*.

A veteran of theatre, television and film, Stephen Lang has had an impressive three-decade career. With over one-hundred film and television credits and an impressive list of theatrical films such as *Avatar* and *Death of a Salesman*, Stephen Lang has also graced the Broadway stage in *A Few Good Men*, *Hamlet*, *The Speed of Darkness* and more. His career is inspirational. He is one of America's more formidable actors on stage or the silver screen. He received Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle and Lucille Lortel Award nominations for his Outstanding Solo Performance of *Beyond Glory*.

Mr. Lang arrived at Post 49 not in a limousine and an entourage, but in a van with his representative. As entered the building he immediately began to interact with the veterans present. He listened, asked questions, shook hands and quickly became an accessible person willing to give of his time and energy.

AMVETS POST 49 - CEDAR FALLS, IOWA
THE INTERVIEW

STEVE TAFT: Playwrights draw inspiration from many sources, history, current events, personal observations and experiences. What were the circumstances that specifically drew you to the book *Beyond Glory* which led to the creation of this one-man play?

STEPHEN LANG: I played basketball for many years in a Sunday morning basketball game with a bunch of guys from all different walks of life. One of the guys I played with for many years was Larry Smith who had been managing editor at *Parade Magazine*. *Parade Magazine* has always been very interested in veterans and vet friendly and over the years they had done a number of articles on Medal of Honor recipients and Larry had either written them or edited them. After he retired he decided to do a book of interviews with living Medal of Honor recipients. And I know you know that being a living Medal of Honor recipient is somewhat of an anomaly in the first place since at one point 70% of the awards were awarded posthumously. So to be a living Medal of Honor recipient is quite special. Larry tracked down and interviewed twenty-five recipients for his book *Beyond Glory* who had served during World War II, Korea and Vietnam. I've always been a history buff and in particular military history, and Larry gave me the book before it was published and it blew my mind quite simply. The stories the men told and the way they told them, and it wasn't so much the story of the event itself but rather the circumstances of their lives and how they lived their life before entering the service and how they lived their lives after they left the service and how the medal shaped their lives, their lives up to that moment when they went above and beyond the call of duty and what the responsibility of receiving the medal means after that and how it continues to mold your life. I just thought it was really the stuff of drama. In any case, I was interested and so I began messing around with it. And I heard the voices . . . it was a beautiful piece of journalism because I heard the voices of the men very, very clearly. And I don't know what drove me to do it but I just started taking these interviews and turning them into what I consider to be bouillon cubes of theatre, because that's what I do. And it had legs and I began working on it in New York, I'm a New Yorker and my home there is a place called The Actor's Studio where I could experiment, I could work things out and I built this show, *Beyond Glory* which is an eighty-minute intermission-less tour-de-force quite frankly, because it's one actor portraying eight different men from different wars, different branches of the services, different ethnicities. And I guess I wanted to do something that I wasn't actually sure I could do. And the fact of the matter is I'm going to do the show tonight. Now I've done this show somewhere over 400 times and I don't know if I can do it tonight as there's still that moment when I'm filled with absolute terror about going out there and doing it. But then when you're out there you find your legs and among friends hopefully and the show flows. So, that's kind of the genesis of it.

ST: Each one of the men in Larry Smith's book has compelling stories to tell. What was it about the eight men you did choose that instinctively told you these are the men and it's their experiences I wish to share with the world?



(Stephen Lang in *Beyond Glory*)

SL: You say I selected the eight. What I say is the eight selected themselves. In fact, I did treatments on a number of others. I'll tell you a story about that in a second. I will say that these eight (and there were others), but these eight, I understood how to tell their stories dramatically. Their stories, their lives suggested a way to treat them because the treatment on all of these stories as you'll see tonight (and I hope you can all be there tonight because I feel that it will be rewarding for you) . . . the way that each story should be treated individually came from within the men's voices themselves, but I wanted to have a cross-section of services, I wanted to make sure I had a cross-section of ethnicities. I play Vernon Baker whom I'm sure some of you are familiar with and I play Daniel Inouye, who was Senior Senator from Hawaii. And I wanted a cross-section of wars. I wanted WWII, Korea and Vietnam all represented. At the time I started this in 2003 there were no living Medal of Honor recipients prior to Vietnam. At this point we do have some.

Now, I'll tell you a quick story. I did a treatment on Bob Kerry who at the time was President of the New School University in New York. Bob Kerry spent fifty-two days in Vietnam and during that time in performed in action for which he received the Medal of Honor and he also participated in a massacre which he acknowledged and which received a tremendous amount of attention. And I did a really good treatment on Kerry, but what I found was it was literally impossible to tell the story of one without telling the story of the other and it just would have been dishonest in every respect to do that. When I finished it I called his office and I went up to his office and did Kerry for Kerry because I would never do anything in the that was not signed off on by the guys I was doing and I was doing a very provocative piece about Kerry. So, when I actually performed Kerry for Kerry in his office it was actually one of the weirdest things I had ever done in my life. And afterwards Bob kind of sat back and said, "Alright, you have my permission to do it." But then as I worked on the show I felt I couldn't use that piece in the show for one reason . . . that particular piece had a particular . . . smell to it. It had to. And that

is not what *Beyond Glory* is about. One of the things I take pride in regarding the show is there is not one ounce of politics in this show . . . because when you all go off to serve it has nothing to do with politics at all, and I wrote this show at a time, back in 2003 and 2004 when I felt the nation was more fractured ideologically, culturally, economically, more fractured than any time in my lifetime and I'm including the Vietnam years, because I think during Vietnam the fault lines in our country, the disagreements in our country were pretty clear. It had to do with our involvement in a war and it had to do with civil rights and then women's rights came a bit after that. But it was pretty clear where you stood. Back in 2004 everything was all screwy. We were divided in so many ways, religiously, economically, sociologically and all kinds of things and I wanted to do a piece not that we could all agree on in some namby pamby way, but I wanted to do a piece that had to do with some of the fundamental ideals and ideas of not only being an American but being a civilized person, but quite specifically being an American as well. I wanted to do something that examined some of the fundamental precepts and concepts that are really important to us, things such as courage, and loyalty, and fortitude was very important and humility, which is probably the single thing that all of the Medal of Honor recipients all have in common because although they're very very different guys, one of the things they all have in common is a tremendous sense of humility. It will be no surprise to you that when asked, anyone of them will say, "I did what I did because it was my job, I did what I did because of the guy next to me." And that sense of humility, of it was no big deal (even though they know that it was) is something that is very common to them.

ST: One of the most compelling men in the book is SSGT Nicky Daniel Bacon. As I was reading his chapter I was captivated by his words of advice for young people facing combat for the first time and that he enjoyed combat, what he refers to as "the game."

SL: I love doing Nick Bacon. He served in Vietnam in the Mekong Delta. His company was caught . . . got pinned in a deadly deadly crossfire with casualties all over the place and he basically, pardon the expression, went ape shit. He went out there with bullets blazing and grenades flying and he scared . . . he killed a lot of people. And Nicky . . . he enjoyed it. That was one of my favorite pieces of writing in the show. What I did was I'd take what they said (these men I selected for the show) and I'd shape it. If I needed to change it, I'd change it. Now, I'm not doing history. I'm not doing straight history. I'm not doing a photograph, I'm doing a painting. This is the way I see it. And if I need to twist Nicky a little bit and stay true to the spirit of who he is, that's what I would do. And the Nick Bacon portion is very demanding, it's almost a jazz riff, the "do's and don'ts of jungle war fair". It's a machine gun delivery.

ST: You've performed *Beyond Glory* not only here in the states but around the world and not just in theatres, but on flight decks, mess halls and even a former horse stable. Where are some of the more memorable places you've presented *Beyond Glory*?

SL: After WW II we took over all of the German bases and then they became American bases (although a lot are shut down now), but we had them for fifty, sixty years. And every Army base had a theatre which I just thought was great. You know they have a big Army theatre tradition in Germany. Who would know? Anyway, I played a playhouse which had been a stable where

Hitler's horse had been stabled. Now, to my knowledge and to their knowledge Hitler had never ridden his horse, but it was there in case he ever wanted to. *(laughter)* I also played in a theatre there that had been a Luftwaffe headquarters and in my dressing room there was a big fireplace with one of those things you cleaned your boots on and everything and I just knew that Hermann Goering had been there at some point warming his big fat ass in front of that fire. I've also performed in Guantanamo Bay, performed at Pearl (Harbor), the hanger deck of the USS Carl Vincent, USS Harry Truman, USS Eisenhower. When I played on the Vincent they took two F-18's and they angled them so their noses were focused right on me and I realized I'm on the most expensive set in the history of theatre. *(laughter)*

ST: As you've performed *Beyond Glory*, has there been or are there differences between performing for a civilian audience and a military audience? And if so, how are they different?

SL: *(Stephen smiles)* Well, military audiences can very respectful which is not necessarily a good thing . . . because a theatre audience (people who just go to the theatre) don't necessarily come to the theatre to see military shows like in New York or Chicago. When they come to the theatre they understand their cues to laugh or something like that. I remember doing a show in the DMZ in Korea and I know for a fact the Sgt. Major said to the battalion, "You are going to a theatre piece this afternoon and you will enjoy it." *(laughter)* So, I wouldn't say it was the most willing audience, but they were there. They were there enjoying it but they weren't giving me anything. So, it's always good when you can kind of loosen them up a little bit. Many times with the military I'll change the way I do the show. I'll do it with a mike in hand and almost do an annotated version of the show. And so I communicate very directly with them.

ST: In my research I see that you've noted: "It was very directly and specifically because of *Beyond Glory* that Jim Cameron cast me in *Avatar*."

SL: I'll tell you a quick story. I did a picture that was shot in 2001 and released in 2003 called *God's and Generals*. It's a Civil War story, basically the battles of Antietam, Chancellorsville, Fredericksburg and the first Manassas and I played Stonewall Jackson. You can't get a better part than Stonewall Jackson and I worked as hard as I worked on anything and I'm very proud of that film. And the film died. It was a bomb, for a lot of reasons that didn't have anything to do with the film at all. It depicts events from 1861-1863 at a time when Confederacy was basically winning every battle. Politically it didn't sit well with a lot of places. Anyway, the film died and I was really distraught. And it was really out of my despair that I wrote *Beyond Glory*. I thought maybe I got to take things into my own hands and build something for myself . . . not wait for the phone to ring. So from 2004-2007, although I did some other jobs, *Beyond Glory* was always something I was doing, when finally in 2007 I got a call to bring the show to Broadway, to bring it to New York. And I did and they of course were advertising it in the New York Times and the advertisement was a photo of me in kind of powerful stance . . . I was doing Nicky Bacon wearing a Diego tee. And Jim Cameron, who was starting to work on *Avatar* saw the picture and went, "Wow, huh." And that's when they called me and Jim said they wanted me to read this script, this *Avatar* script because he thought I might be right for this part. The fact of the matter is I got the part in *Avatar* specifically and directly because of *Beyond Glory*. And I wrote *Beyond*

Glory because of a failure which was *God's and Generals*. And the lesson . . . I speak to actors about this sometimes because it's significant as acting is a tough, tough career. You know, a lot of failure, a lot of rejection. The fact of the matter is that within defeat there are always the seeds of victory. Or at least you need to approach things that way. So, *Beyond Glory*, which I never sought to do for any other reason than I wanted to do it because it calls upon me to use all my resources. It delivered something to me that I never expected which was a role in a film that has become the most profitable film ever made and now is turning into a major franchise. We're going to do three more of them so it's kind of a significant part of my career will be defined by *Avatar* and *Avatar* came about because of *Beyond Glory*.

ST: You noted earlier your affinity for history. And perhaps this is evident in some of your roles whether portraying the men in *Beyond Glory* or Babe Ruth or Stonewall Jackson. Does your acting process differ when playing a historical character opposed to a fictional character and if so, how?

SL: If you're playing Babe Ruth you better be sure you get the swing down. When you're playing a historical figure, and Babe is great example because if you blow it you blow it because people will know it and say, "That ain't Babe Ruth." So I'm very particular about that. Stonewall Jackson was such an eccentric person and he was, as Shakespeare would say about Hamlet, "He was the observed of all observers." Everybody looked at Stonewall Jackson, so there's a lot written about him. We know how he walked, what he ate, how he worshipped, how he led his men, how he rode his horse, we know all that stuff and if you choose not to do something it has to be a choice that you make because you want to make it not because you don't know about it. But, in portraying guys in *Beyond Glory*, it's a little bit different because although a few you may know who Clarence Sasser or Hector Cafferetta is because you're servicemen, and probably you don't, but the fact of the matter is nobody else does. But I'm under no compunction to render Hector accurately in terms of what he looked like or how he talked, I do it through my own lens. I think the more public the person the more responsibility one has to not make any obvious mistakes.

ST: Has there ever been a role that you were hesitant about or scared you in any way?

SL: Years ago I had just finished a television series called *Crime Story* and I didn't know what I was going to do next and I was sent a script for a film called *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. I started reading it and I remember on page 46 (I don't know why I remember that), but on page 46 I went, "Ahhhhhh" and I threw it across the room. Anyway, the next day my agent called to go over some of the scripts I'd been sent and he said, "What did you think of *The Last Exit to Brooklyn*?" I said, "Ah well, to be honest I didn't finish it." And he said, "Why don't you finish it because they want to know how much you want to do the film." OK. So I read the thing again and what I realized was I was terrified. I was scared of playing this part. *The Last Exit to Brooklyn*, some people consider it a classic and some people consider it pornography, it was written in the early fifties by a guy named Hubert Selby and it takes place on the waterfront of Brooklyn in the early 1950's, post-war waterfront and the role they wanted me to play was a Union guy named Harry Black who was a tough guy but in fact, falls in love with a transvestite. I

mean this is pretty crazy stuff. And when I read that I went “Ahhh” I can’t do that.” But then I realized I was scared of it and when I thought about for a minute I thought, “That’s a pretty good reason to do something.” Like I said before, one of the reasons I did *Beyond Glory* was I didn’t know if I could do it. And so I did it. I did *The Last Exit to Brooklyn* and it’s an amazing . . . it’s a very very fine film or at least that’s the way I remember it because I actually can’t watch it. And I won’t let my children watch it. (laughter) And it’s not pornographic by the way. But it’s a very intense picture.

At this point in the interview we opened up questions from the audience.

Q – How do you find time to do films and television and everything that you do?

SL: You carve out the time. I retired *Beyond Glory* and put it on hiatus for seven years. So from 2007-2013, six years, I didn’t do it at all. And because I play these aging vets I’m never going to get too old. So I just try and balance (projects). I got a bunch films in the can but I can’t ever remember what they are and we’re going to get going on the *Avatar* films. I got a nice picture out there now called *23 Blast*, a football movie, takes place in Kentucky and it’s a very very nice movie. It’s kind of a feel good movie, but it’s a good movie I think. And I’ve been working on the film, *Beyond Glory* which is kind of a performance/documentary for over a year now and a year from now it’ll be finished and in Festival’s and stuff and I hope the next time we’re out on tour with *Beyond Glory* we’ll be bringing the film out also.

Q – What drove you to do a show like *Beyond Glory* and to deal with such tough topics like Vietnam?

SL: I think it’s happenstance. If I’d been playing basketball with a guy who wrote a book about Walt Whitman and I thought, “That’s amazing”, maybe I would’ve done a solo show about Walt Whitman. The thing is, there’s an infinite number of topics out there. Everything is potentially interesting. This (*Beyond Glory* by Larry Smith) was such a well-written piece and it hit me at just the time I was looking for something and I think that’s why it happened.

Q – What do like personally? Family? Hobbies?

SL – I’m married, it’ll be thirty-five years this coming June. My wife, Tina is with me on the tour. I don’t know if I’d tour at this point if she didn’t come out with me. It would be too tough and lonely. We have four children who are all launched and doing good. What I love is acting. I mean I love my work. I love to act. I love motorcycles. That’s another thing that’s an important part of my life . . . is I’m a motorcycle rider. And aside from that, we just had our first grandchild six months ago and I just want to keep working and stay in shape, see if I can stay fit and take care of my family and mess around with motorcycles and that’s kind of it. I just want to keep making a living. I’m so geared towards work. An actor never really has to retire. They always need some old fart in something and I figure I’ll just keep doing it. I had kind of a revelation the other day. I’ve been doing yoga now for five years. I’m not as strong as I use to be but I want to

stay flexible and so I do a lot of yoga now and I had a realization that my best work is still ahead of me. That I'm not done. I'm going to keep doing it. At least that's my objective.

Q: How many of the guys that you portray have you met?

SL: Clarence Sasser is a good friend of mine. I was in the Persian Gulf doing the show and I got a call . . . they brought me to Washington to perform it, in the Senate, in honor of Senator Daniel Inouye's 80th birthday. That was a joint resolution by the Senate majority and minority leaders and it was the only thing they actually agreed on the entire year. So, I know those two dudes, Stockdale's family, Bacon's family. When I started doing the show all eight were alive and as we sit here today, two are still alive. They all signed off. Because it's an impressionistic piece it's not vital to me to actually meet the guys. And in a way I was very shy in doing so. You can understand, Vernon Baker . . . you know, he's a black dude, I'm going to walk up and say, "Hello Mr. Baker. I'm going to play you." (In a deep voice as Vernon Baker) "Well, I always thought it would be Morgan. (*laughter*) Maybe Denzel." (*more laughter*)

ST: What do you want your legacy to be as an actor and as a person?

SL: It's hard to answer that without being a little flip. The flip answer is: "He was on time." Because I'm chronically on time. I guess if I thought about it, it would be . . . "I never knew it was him." Because to me, acting is transformational and what I've also tried to do when I act is to transform. I've always felt that every part I've ever played is more important than I am. And not every actor feels that way . . . I don't judge it at all. There are stars that are hired to be stars. Steve McQueen was never hired to be anything other than Steve McQueen. You wouldn't want to hide him in a wig and all that stuff because he was "Steve McQueen". There are many actors like that. But that's never been who I've been. I've always tried to be transformational and I've had people say to me: "I've looked you up on the internet man and you've played that, and you've played that, and you've played that and you've played that and whoa, that's weird, it's the same guy." And so to me, in a way, that's what I'd hope. And as human being, I think if I had to write it, I'd say: "He was useful." When I talk to actors about choices . . . when I talk to young actors . . . it's not a question of making good choices or bad choices or this or that, it's about being useful. We all want to achieve a goal, we all want to play the role the best we can, so what's the most useful thing I can do? One of the things I like about doing *Beyond Glory* is that fellows like you will come up to me and say, "Thank you for what you do." And I say, "Thank you for what you do for me." But if *Beyond Glory* is in any way useful, it's worth it.

Note: As we are about to wrap up the interview I can't resist having a little fun.

ST: Many actors are known for that one famous line in a film. Arnold with "I'll be back" for example. Now, there is perhaps one little known film, a comedy that always makes me laugh. Could you please tell the folks here that they are not in Kansas anymore.

SL (*laughs*) Oh, ohhh, I thought you were going to say (*leaning forward to the microphone as Ike Clanton*): "Law don't go 'round here in Kansas. Law don't go 'round here." Because a lot of guys

like *Tombstone*. But, (in character he graciously grants my request) “You’re not in Kansas anymore.” (*lots of laughter*)

[To gain an understanding of what is behind this moment go to:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYfptng7AFk>]

SL: People like that one. I tell you, I was the first guy to say (*in the character of Col. Nathan Jessup*) “You can’t handle the truth.” I said it way before Jack (Nicholson) did. I said it a lot more than Jack because I played that role two-hundred and ninety-seven times (on Broadway *in A Few Good Men*). They didn’t give me the part in the movie, but if you lose a part to Jack Nicholson in a movie, that’s OK.

ST: I know you have a show this evening so I want to thank you for sharing your time with us this afternoon and not only chatting about *Beyond Glory* but also providing some insight about acting that my colleague (UNI Theatre Professor Matthew Weedman – in the audience) and I may share with our students.

SL: I’ll tell you one more thing about acting and the military. One of the things I get a kick out of . . . in the show tonight the only thing on stage besides myself is a trunk. And of course, a military footlocker for a soldier, that’s home. Everything you got and that you care about is in there. And in the theatrical profession, the trunk is also vital because actors traditionally are itinerant creatures, we move around and the theatre trunk is part of the lore, part of the myth and part of the history of theatre. So, one of the things I get a kick out of is the military and the theatre come together, they coalesce in the trunk that’s on stage, this footlocker. That’s where the theatre and the military meet. They meet in other places as well because the military is based on discipline and so is the theatre.

(*To the audience.*) I hope you all will come tonight (*to Beyond Glory*) and I hope you’ll stick around after so I can come out to the lobby afterward and shake hands with you and take a picture with you. Thank you for having me here today. It’s been a real pleasure.
