

BUILDING A BRIDGE:

Founded by Marine Veteran-Turned-Actor, Arts in the Armed Forces Seeks to Unite Military, Theater Communities



COURTESY OF ANTON SATTLER



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Marine veteran Anton Sattler, playwright of “Local Gods,” is the recipient of AITAF’s 2020 Bridge Award. The former infantry officer, pictured in the right photo prior to a mission with 3/7 in Ramadi, Iraq, in 2005, drew from his life experiences, including those from his time in the Corps, as he wrote his award-winning work.

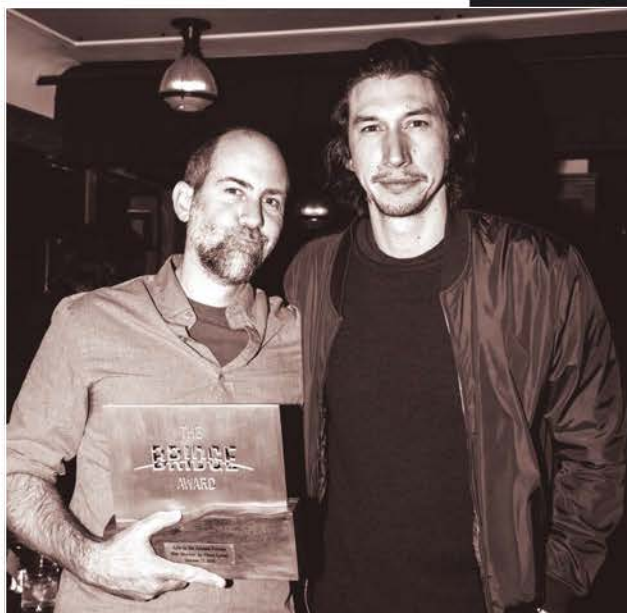
By Sara W. Bock

Marine veteran Anton Sattler enjoyed writing, but he never considered writing a play—that is, not until the opportunity presented itself in 2018, when nonprofit organization Arts in the Armed Forces (AITAF) announced it was accepting submissions for its inaugural Bridge Award. The winner of the award, which recognizes an emerging playwright who is either an active-duty or veteran servicemember, receives a \$10,000 cash prize and an AITAF-produced public reading of their winning work.

With a nudge from his wife, Jackie, who strongly encouraged him to take a shot at it, Sattler, a former infantry officer who resides in New York City, began typing away.

Sattler’s first entry, a play called “The Borough,” didn’t earn him the prize—that honor went to U.S. Army veteran and first-time playwright Vinnie Lyman for his submission “War Stories”—but the experience of writing and receiving constructive feedback from a panel of esteemed professional playwrights, directors and designers sparked something within Sattler, who had studied

fiction writing and film at the University of Pittsburgh as an undergraduate prior to accepting a commission in the Marine Corps. A year after trying for the first Bridge Award, Sattler began working on a draft for a new play, “Local Gods,” which he submitted in 2019, earning himself a spot among the top five finalists.



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Left: Actor, Marine veteran and AITAF co-founder Adam Driver, right, congratulates the first-ever Bridge Award winner, U.S. Army veteran Vinnie Lyman, left, on his play “War Stories” in 2018.



This year, the third time proved to be the charm for the tenacious writer, who, armed with the feedback on “Local Gods” he received from the judges, started a second draft of the same play. In May, “Local Gods” was announced as the winning work, selected by a panel of industry professionals led by head judge and renowned American playwright David Henry Hwang, earning Sattler the 2020 Bridge Award.

For Sattler, who had stopped pursuing creative work during his time in the Corps, it speaks volumes that AITAF has provided a forum that not only motivates veterans to write down their stories but also provides them with a group of industry leaders who want to read their work and are willing to provide feedback on it.

“The core ideas and emotional battles in ‘Local Gods’ were in my head and my heart for a long time,” said Sattler. “I don’t know that they would have ever become a play without AITAF leaving an open door that said, ‘Come inside, we want to hear what you have to say.’ ”

That sort of invitation is precisely what Erica Newhouse, an actor who also works as a program director for AITAF, had in mind when she conceived the idea for the award.

“I just thought that this award could not only acknowledge a great piece of writing, but also inspire people to write their stories,” said Newhouse, adding that the award seemed like a natural extension of AITAF’s mission. “What we do primarily is bring play readings to military

Driver and fellow actor Michael Shannon perform a scene from “True West” by American playwright Sam Shepard during AITAF’s 10th anniversary celebration at American Airlines Theatre in New York City in November 2018. The primary mission of AITAF is to bring “stripped down” versions of American plays to military audiences, eliminating costumes, lighting and sets in order to focus on the power of language. (Photo by Jenn Emerling)

bases around the world. And they’re stripped down—they’re just readings of contemporary American plays. For us, language is the most important part of the event [...] So I thought, how can we use that core value of great language? [...] Our

From the left, Adam Driver and actors Dylan Baker and Tsebiyah Derry answer questions from the audience following a November 2019 AITAF performance of “A Raisin in the Sun” at their annual Veterans Day event in New York City. (Photo by Jenn Emerling)

direction is the arts going to the military, and how can we bring the military into the arts?”

AITAF succeeded in doing just that by creating the award, which garnered more than 200 submissions in the competition’s first year alone.

Sattler’s “Local Gods” tells the story of a female Army veteran who struggles to re-adapt to civilian life as she attempts to reconcile her conscience and deal with inner moral conflict. “This play is a keenly observed, poignant portrait of the losses we suffer when we go to war, and the losses we suffer when we come back,” reads a synopsis from AITAF.

And while the events in the play are fictitious, Sattler says they’re based on a mix of his own experiences and observations both in and out of the military and are drawn from the “emotional truths” that come from serving, deploying, coming home and adapting to life after the military.

“I think no matter what the series of events are for anybody, I think there are a lot of universal things that somebody goes through whenever they’ve had those experiences that I think most people in the military would share or that they would relate to,” said Sattler, who led Marines in combat during two tours in Iraq with 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment before leaving active duty in 2008. He continued to serve in the Marine Corps Reserve as a public affairs officer in New



York City until 2015 and in the meantime, produced the critically acclaimed Korean War documentary “Chosin” with fellow Marine veteran Brian Iglesias, which was released in 2010. He’s since earned his MBA using the GI Bill and has worked in operations and strategy for tech and media companies in New York.

As a first-time playwright with no formal training in the field, Sattler has spent countless hours reading and researching the format over the past few years. Typically, said Newhouse, winners of other notable playwriting awards have checked all the boxes for a very specific career progression starting with master’s degree playwriting programs that have “groomed

them” for the industry and provided them valuable networking opportunities. What sets the Bridge Award apart is that it allows a space for members of the military community—most of whom have not taken that traditional path—to connect with the theater community. That connection creates a “bridge” between the two groups, whose members often have “a lot of feelings about each other but not a lot of firsthand understanding,” said Newhouse.

For Sattler, the experience of writing “Local Gods” was about more than just winning a prize; in many ways, it was therapeutic.

“I transitioned to civilian life long before I wrote my first play, but in a way, that transition never ends,” said Sattler. “Writing has helped me put on paper a lot of thoughts and ideas and feelings that seemed impossible to convey in a conversation with a veteran or a civilian, or maybe I just wasn’t ready to have those conversations. But I could let them out by having discussions with myself and



Cadets from the United States Military Academy enjoy AITAF’s performance of “True West” at American Airlines Theatre in New York City, in November 2018.

JENN EMERLING

my characters. And for me, that was just as good.”

The complex thoughts and feelings that military servicemembers often experience during their transition to civilian life are exactly what led Marine veteran and actor Adam Driver of “Star Wars” fame to start AITAF in 2008 alongside his now-wife Joanne Tucker, while they both were studying acting at The Juilliard School in New York.

Prior to attending Juilliard, Driver, who enlisted in the Marine Corps just after 9/11, was serving as a mortarman with Weapons Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment and was preparing to deploy to Iraq when he was medically discharged due to an injury from a mountain biking accident. He’s openly discussed his struggle to find meaning, community and self-worth during his abrupt transition back into the civilian world—and how his training at Juilliard equipped him to use language to deal with those feelings in a constructive way.

“I was really for the first time discovering playwrights and characters and plays that had nothing to do with the military but were somehow describing my military experience that before, to me, was indescribable, and I felt myself becoming less aggressive as I was able to put words to feelings for the first time and realizing what a valuable tool that was,” said Driver to an audience during a 2015 TED Talk as part of the PBS “War & Peace” series, adding that to his surprise, he realized that the military and theater communities were more alike than he had previously thought as both work together to accomplish a mission greater than themselves. “I



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Audience members give a standing ovation following AITAF’s November 2019 performance of “A Raisin in the Sun” in New York City. The annual event, which is held around Veterans Day, is an outreach to the New York City veterans community and is just one of the many performances the organization provides at military installations worldwide each year.

thought, ‘How great would it be to create a space that combined these two seemingly dissimilar communities?’” Driver said.

Thus, AITAF was born, a project that started slowly and grew in synchrony with Driver’s budding career as an actor. Widely known for his portrayal of the dark and menacing Kylo Ren in the “Star Wars” franchise’s most recent trilogy, Driver has also appeared in various theater productions including “Burn This” on Broadway, for which his performance was nominated for a Tony Award, and in the HBO series “Girls,” which earned him three Emmy nominations. Driver also was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Sup-

porting Actor in the 2018 film “BlacKkKlansman” and Best Actor in the 2019 film “Marriage Story,” in which he starred opposite Scarlett Johansson.

According to AITAF executive director Lindsay Miserandino, Driver and Tucker wrote letters, asked favors, and for the first six or seven years, held one or two events a year at military bases as well as an annual event in New York City for the local veterans community. Those numbers slowly grew, and in 2019, AITAF produced 15 events at military installations across the globe.

The format is simple: AITAF gathers a group of talented, high-profile actors who volunteer their time and talent and travel to bases and stations to perform contemporary American plays or monologues in a strikingly minimalist way—without costumes, sets or lighting. The focus, by default, is on the language—“to show that theater can be created in any setting,” said Driver.

“It’s a powerful thing, getting in a room with complete strangers and re-



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From the left, Marine veteran and actor Rob Riggie, director Kip Fagan, actor Darren Pettie and AITAF program director Erica Newhouse greet Col Kevin Hutchison, CO of Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center Bridgeport, Calif., following an AITAF event there, on May 9, 2019.



AITAF co-founder and actor Joanne Tucker, right, presents the 2019 Bridge Award to Air Force veteran Shairi Engle, at The Public Theater in New York City in October 2019. Engle received the honor for her play "Tampons, Dead Dogs and Other Disposable Things."

GILES CLARK

minding ourselves of our humanity, and that self-expression is just as valuable a tool as the rifle on your shoulder," Driver said during his 2015 TED Talk. "I can think of no better community to arm with a new means of self expression than those protecting our country."

Past AITAF artists have included household names like Rachel Brosnahan, Ben Stiller, Marine veteran Rob Riggle, Taye Diggs, Jake Gyllenhaal, Keri Russell and Samira Wiley, among dozens of others.

Actor Laura Linney, who participated in AITAF's first-ever event at Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, Calif., in 2008, loved the experience and has continued her involvement in the organization over the years.

"I was so moved by Adam, what he was doing and how much he loves the military and the people who give their lives there, and the way he loves the arts," said Linney. "It made complete sense that he would want to bring those two communities together. The arts are inherently healing, so it's a portal into a whole other resource that I believe many communities aren't aware of. Of how medicinal the arts can be, how intimate, how inspiring it can be, and how it makes you just feel a lot less alone. I think the arts are good for everybody, and there's a real place for it within the culture of the military."

The organization also hosts film screenings at military installations during which a high-profile actor or director picks a movie that's meaningful to them and, following a showing, discusses the film with a moderator. AITAF also employs student veteran interns at its headquarters in New York through a paid internship program.

With the addition of the Bridge Award, AITAF has expanded its reach



PATRICK DUNFORD

A World War II veteran enjoys an AITAF-sponsored reading at the New York State Veterans' Home in St. Albans, N.Y., in 2019.

to help ensure that the military experience is brought into the arts community—which doesn't always mean that veterans' contributions have to be overtly military related.

"Part of bridging that military-civilian divide is that just because someone is in the military doesn't mean that they wear their uniform all the time," said Newhouse, noting that the 2019 Bridge Award winner, Air Force veteran Shairi Engle, submitted a play that was not military themed. "There's a person underneath that uniform. Just like if we wore uniforms to our jobs and people thought that's all that we were, we're not."

Notably, all three winners of the Bridge Award have been first-time playwrights despite the fact that AITAF has received submissions from professional writers and Emmy award winners. But particularly for those who are writing for the first time, it can be disheartening to submit something you've poured your time and energy into and not receive any sort of response or indication that anyone has actually read it. In an effort to foster true connection among people and communities, the Bridge Award process includes a descriptive evaluative form filled out by the members of the judging panel, and each submitting writer has the option of requesting feedback based on those evaluations.

"Getting even one person to read what you've written is very challenging, so having access to a program like the Bridge Award where people who live and breathe 'story' every day in the course of their profession will provide you with feedback is very valuable," said Anton Sattler.

For Sattler, the journey has just begun. Until recently, he had never heard "Local Gods" read out loud before.

In June, AITAF organized a "closed door" reading of the play, recruiting actors like Jason Butler Harner of "Ozark" and Connie Shulman from "Orange is the New Black" to bring

For the latest information about the Bridge Award, including submission guidelines for 2021, visit <https://aitaf.org/bridge-award/>



Adam Driver, seated, and actor Michael Shannon, standing, perform “True West” at AITAF’s 10th anniversary event in New York, November 2018. Shannon is one of many well-known artists who volunteers his time and talent in support of AITAF’s mission to foster a connection between the military and theater communities.

“Local Gods” to life. Typically, the reading—designed to help the playwright further develop the play prior to its public debut—is conducted in person, but due to the coronavirus pandemic, it took place on a Zoom video call.

Regardless of the format, that first reading was highly beneficial for Sattler as he enters the collaborative stage of the production of “Local Gods” in anticipation of its forthcoming public reading in New York next year once theaters are able to reopen after the COVID-19 shutdown.

“How things live in peoples’ voices and bodies, it’s so different from how they live on the page, and you learn so much immediately. Theater is a collaborative art in a way that other written forms are not, and so he’s finally going to get collaborators now. That’s a really important gift that I think we can offer through this award,” said Anna O’Donoghue, the Bridge Award Chair. “Writing is a solitary action, but theater making is a collective one, so we can start to form the collective around these people.”

It’s a critical time for the arts community as theaters across the country are shuttered, stages are vacant, row after row of seats are empty and #savethearts is trending on Twitter—a reminder that the collective experience we find in theater and the arts is such an integral part of our society. The social distancing measures necessitated by the spread of COVID-19 have forced AITAF to think “outside the box” in regards to its programming, said Miserandino, and while film screenings over Zoom have been a welcome distraction for both artists and servicemembers, nothing can replicate the value of a true shared experience.

In the meantime, with the support of AITAF, Sattler will move forward with the process of preparing “Local Gods” for its public debut—and when the day finally comes, it will be a moment he surely won’t take for granted. 🍷

Actor Adam Breaux, left, talks with Marines following his performance in an AITAF reading at MCMWTC Bridgeport, Calif., May 9, 2019.





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