

Q&A

TEN QUESTIONS FOR STEPHEN LANG

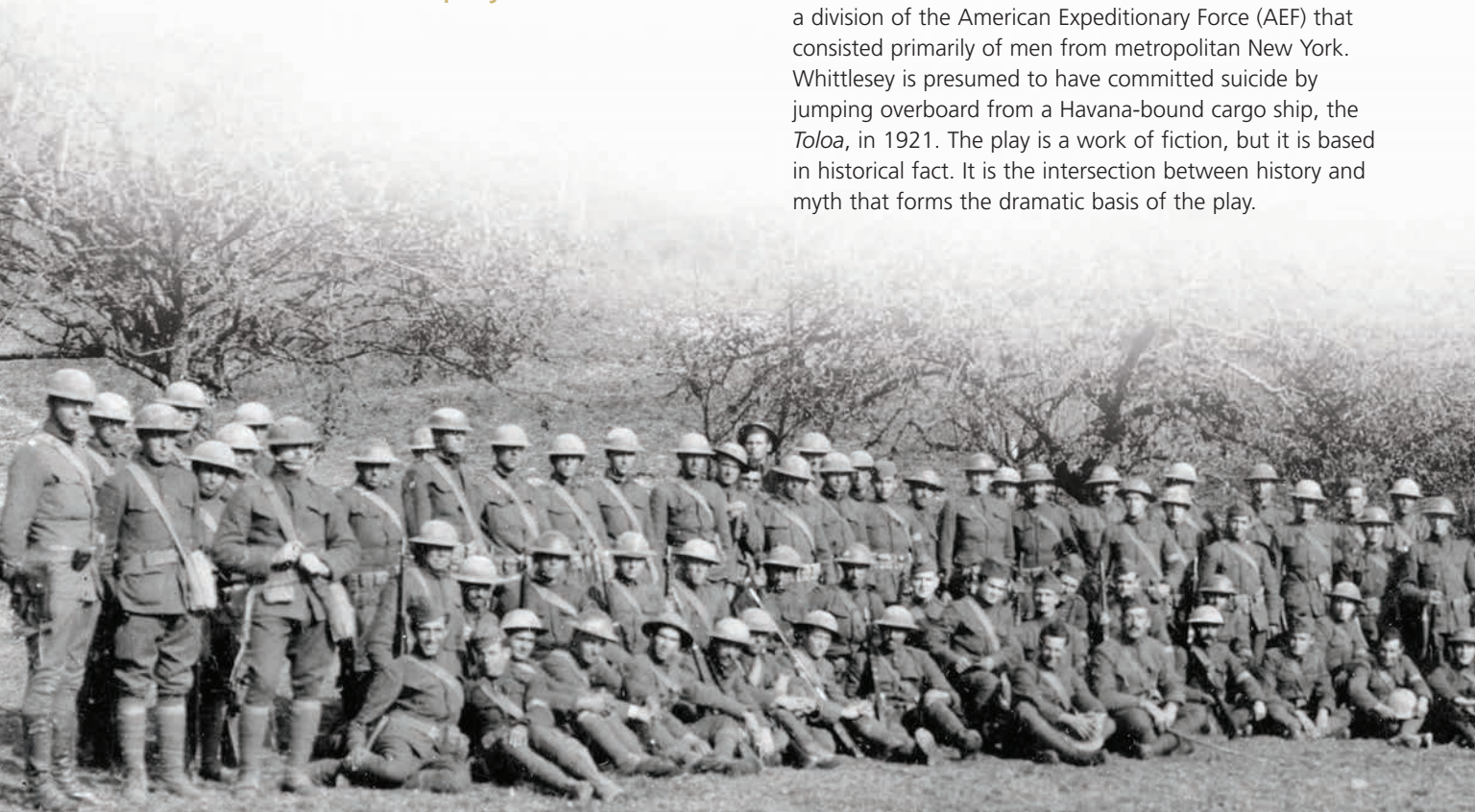
BY JOSIE MADISON

The award-winning actor and playwright discusses his new play.

1.

Can you tell us a little bit about *His Dark Land*?

I wrote the play in 2017 to mark the centenary of US entry into WWI. It is a selective examination of and inquiry into the character of Major Charles White Whittlesey, the self-effacing commander of the fabled "Lost Battalion," a division of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) that consisted primarily of men from metropolitan New York. Whittlesey is presumed to have committed suicide by jumping overboard from a Havana-bound cargo ship, the *To/oa*, in 1921. The play is a work of fiction, but it is based in historical fact. It is the intersection between history and myth that forms the dramatic basis of the play.



2.

What was the “Lost Battalion?”

For five days in October 1918, elements of the 77th Division of the AEF were isolated and trapped in a “pocket” of treacherous terrain in the German-held Argonne Forest. Relentlessly exposed to attack from machine guns, trench mortars, grenades, and flame throwers, a dire situation was exacerbated by an almost total lack of food, water, and blankets, as well as a dwindling supply of ammunition. Adding insult to injury, due to mistaken coordinates, the Americans were victims of bombardment from their own Allied artillery. The men, mostly New Yorkers, held on for five torturous days and nights as casualties mounted and the bodies piled up. Front-line correspondents, aware of the grim predicament but short on facts, garnished their homeward bound dispatches with imaginative speculation in colorful prose written for a news hungry public back in the United States. A copy editor on a Manhattan daily dubbed the beleaguered doughboys “The Lost Battalion,” even as events unfolded. Almost 600 men walked into the pocket on October 2. On October 7, less than 150 stumbled, limped, and were carried out, into the radiant realm of heroic myth.

3.

Is there a background story to the title?

The title of the play is drawn from the poem “Rendezvous with Death” by Alan Seeger: “It may be he shall take my hand and lead me into his dark land.”

4.

What about Whittlesey? Why did you choose to focus on him?

Reflecting on Whittlesey’s presumed suicide I find myself as interested in the ‘how’ as in the ‘why.’ Years ago I read that the poet Hart Crane ended his life by jumping off an ocean liner at sea. It made me shudder back then, and I feel it even now as I write about Charles Whittlesey. Such a terribly lonely way to die it seems to me, perhaps with final moments of panic or regret as the ship obliviously plows on, lamps, laughter, and life receding in the distance. A chilly way to die as well. So, it was the method that really caught my attention. Why book passage to Cuba? Why Cuba? Did it matter at all where he booked passage? How did he pack for the voyage? Did he purchase a new tropical suit and straw boater that he knew he would never wear? It is clear that this was not an impulsive act of despair because Whittlesey left letters both in his



The surviving members of the Lost Battalion after the siege in the Argonne Forest.



GRANGER

Charles White Whittlesey

shipboard cabin and in his New York law office. Although shedding no light on his reasons the letters did make it perfectly clear that he was not coming back, lending a mysterious and poetically melancholy aspect to his decision. It's sad but not sordid. Of course, the 'why' is the central question, but the 'how' is so intriguing, particularly as an illuminating reflection of the man's nature. Although it didn't occur to me for the longest time, in the end, the reason he chose to end his life the way he did is both touching and obvious: he didn't want to leave a mess for someone else to clean up. Whittlesey was being neither intentionally enigmatic or mysterious, and certainly not poetic. He was being tidy. That tidiness is completely in keeping with his character. He was a thoughtful and considerate man.

5.

How did you approach the challenge of dramatizing this historic story?

A solitary suicide at sea presents a challenge to the dramatist. I suppose one could soliloquize, and perhaps Whittlesey did quietly utter a final prayer or scream an oath of rage, but I doubt it. Whittlesey was the least histrionic of men. No, I think he quietly went about his business, which is not at all helpful to the playwright. Because an extended "goodbye cruel world" soliloquy would wear thin very quickly it was necessary to introduce another character to ask questions, to get Whittlesey talking. Damon Runyon was the obvious choice. A reporter employed by William Randolph Hearst, Runyon accompanied the AEF on Pershing's Grand Offensive in the Meuse/Argonne. Although he did not coin the term, Runyon filed stories on the Lost Battalion, and was present at HQ when Whittlesey was promoted following the ordeal. There is no doubt that Runyon and Whittlesey did converse on that occasion, and possibly at other times as well. So, Runyon was in the right place historically. Because Broadway was his beat, Runyon would have a special interest in the 77th, New York's own "Metropolitan" Division, which was made up of a very diverse and colorful group of citizen soldiers. In fact, it was Runyon's command of a distinctively New York vernacular that clinched the deal, as well as his stylistic tendency to write of past events in the present tense, creating a crucial sense of immediacy very helpful to the dramatist. So, Runyon became a necessary and supporting part of the play.

The play is set up as a conversation between Whittlesey and Runyon. Runyon serves as interlocutor. He attempts to draw out a very reticent Whittlesey concerning actions that were possibly misguided, and most certainly misunderstood and misreported both then and now. The play takes place aboard the USS *Toia* bound for Havana. Whittlesey is about to jump overboard when he is interrupted by Runyon.

6.

You've spent a lot of time with the character of Whittlesey. What do you think drove him to take his own life?

A century back it was called "battle fatigue," "shell shock," or just "the jangles." These days we know it as PTSD. By any name it is evident that Whittlesey suffered from it and finally capitulated to it. That, however, is neither specific nor sufficient as an explanation for his actions. After all, of the thousands of veterans similarly afflicted, the vast majority soldiered on, trying to lock away the horrific memories—the sights, sounds, and smells of carnage that would prey on them, waking or asleep, for the rest of their days. Whittlesey chose not to soldier on. Why? Perhaps it is because he was, as fabled commander and Medal of Honor recipient, in a singular and psychologically precarious position.

7.

Can you elaborate on why the Medal of Honor was such a responsibility?

There is no higher military decoration than the Medal of Honor. It is the shining star at the very top of the military's so-called Pyramid of Honor and it is only awarded for documented acts of conspicuous bravery and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty. Often the acts are fatal, and in such cases the medal can be viewed as a posthumous memorial. But it can get complicated for recipients who live to tell the tale because the medal carries huge symbolic responsibility. Those who wear it are weighted with the expectation to publicly personify the qualities it represents. Recipients are expected to be the best face of the military, and most are able to embrace that responsibility by making frequent appearances to tell their stories, and to be celebrated as heroes. Over and over. Whittlesey put on a game face for three years, but it seems he finally could no longer do so. The cultivation of such a public persona was completely at odds with Whittlesey's natural reticence. In fact, I believe the medal became a millstone that only grew heavier with the passage of time.



The Medal of Honor, as it looked in 1918

CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOR SOCIETY, MOUNT PLEASANT, SOUTH CAROLINA

8.

Surely a figure as public as Whittlesey was subjected to some criticism as well?

Certainly. According to the 'History of the 77th Division' the Grand Assault on the Meuse-Argonne was intended to "strike at the door of Germany." It is noteworthy that the 77th was not a regular army comprised of professional soldiers, but rather a national army consisting of raw and untrained draftees. Whittlesey himself, although a volunteer, was very much a citizen soldier, not part of the traditional command structure that emerged through West Point and other military academies. In the aftermath of the Lost Battalion, Whittlesey was simultaneously lauded a hero and damned with faint praise as a competent commander who "fought where he was caught." There were whispered suggestions that the battalion only found itself surrounded because of the over-zealous leadership of an inexperienced commander—an amateur. Whether or not the whispers caused Whittlesey to question or doubt his own actions is unclear, but Whittlesey was an extremely sensitive soul and I have no doubt that he was wounded and perhaps defensive about such mutterings.

Other rumors drifted fog-like in the aftermath concerning the friendly fire bombardment on October 4. It was suggested that Whittlesey had supplied incorrect coordinates via carrier pigeon, thus calling down the artillery barrage on his own men.

9.

Was that true?

It is possible but highly unlikely, and absolutely denied by Whittlesey. It seems much more likely either that the coordinates were mistakenly transmitted after being received at HQ or the guns were incorrectly aimed. Whittlesey was a meticulous man and very cool under fire. He had been precise in achieving his objective, and the likelihood is high that the coordinates were engraved in his mind. Still, I imagine that it was painful and not in keeping with his naturally self-effacing modesty to have to set the record straight.

10.

What were your thoughts as you wrote those lines? There's a quote toward the end of the play that is really moving.

Whittlesey is bringing the conversation with Runyon to an end and he says, "Let's close on this then. Several weeks ago, on November 11th, I marched the Dead March behind the casket of an unknown soldier as the procession made its way to the cemetery at Arlington. It was solemn, dignified, impressive. Thousands were moved to quiet tears. I felt nothing. Not grief, nor pride, neither victorious or defeated. Nothing. But as the casket was lowered into the earth a feeling did blossom in my chest. Envy. I envied this soldier his peace and his solitude. And I envied his anonymity. And the decision was made."

Of course all the quotes in the play are fictitious, written by my hand. However, I stand by them in the sense that, writing as a dramatist rather than a historian, the words truthfully define what Charles Whittlesey must have felt on that early Armistice Day. The silence of the crowd. The serenity of the setting. The coolness of the tomb. The anonymity of the warrior. The totality of these factors represented a consummation devoutly to be wished, and they settled Whittlesey on the course he would take. Three weeks later he boarded the ship to Havana. A thoughtful and fair man to the end, he made sure he paid his December rent to his landlady before embarking on the final journey towards his own rendezvous with death. ■

**STEPHEN LANG**

has earned enduring critical and popular acclaim over the course of a distinguished career as an actor in theatre, television, and film. His work on Broadway includes *Death of a Salesman*, *A Few Good Men*, *The Speed of Darkness*, and *Hamlet*. Nominations and awards include the Tony, Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, Lucille Lortel, Helen Hayes, and Joseph Jefferson awards. He has performed his solo play, *Beyond Glory*, for audiences all over the world, receiving the Chairman's Medal for Distinguished Service from the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Bob Hope award from the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. His acclaimed film of *Beyond Glory* has received awards at the Barbados Independent Film Festival, Buffalo Niagara Film Fest, and the Phoenix Film Fest. Other memorable films include *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Tombstone*, *Gettysburg*, *Gods and Generals*, *Public Enemies*, *Avatar*, and *Don't Breathe*. He stars in Peter Jackson's upcoming epic adventure film *Mortal Engines*, which Universal Pictures will open worldwide in December, and he is currently filming all four *Avatar* sequels for director James Cameron. He has received honorary doctorates from Jacksonville University, and from his alma mater, Swarthmore College. He is a member of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a member of The Actors Studio. Lang will receive the 2018 Empire State Archives & History Award on Thursday, October 25, in Chancellors Hall at the New York State Education Building in Albany. For more information and to purchase tickets, please visit our website at <https://www.nysarchivestrust.org/>.