



## THEATRE OF WAR

**PHIL GOODWIN** talks to Jonathan Guy Lewis about the world premiere of his new stage show in Exeter

**J**ONATHAN Guy Lewis is probably best known as Sgt Chris McCleod in the ITV drama *Soldier*, *Soldier* back in the Nineties.

This week the actor and director returns to the armed forces theme for a world premiere of a new stage show which has been dubbed *The Full Military Monty*.

*Soldier On*, the new play he wrote and directed, tells the story of what happens when a company of soldiers become a company of actors.

Casting real-life veterans alongside actors, it mixes hard-hitting storytelling and dance to depict the fresh battleground faced by soldiers who swap the routine of army life for an uncertain future on "Civvy Street".

Ahead of a national tour, Jonathan, an army scholar who was invalided out of the forces before playing a fictional soldier, returns to the Exeter Northcott Theatre – on the campus where he studied back in the Eighties.

He says themes of "serving Queen and country are never far away" from him and considers his drama about veterans suffering post-traumatic stress disorder as an attempt to return to the

cathartic tales of warriors coming back from the wars.

"The ancient world knew all about the horrors of war. After a battle was fought, traditionally, the survivors would make a big fire, stand around it and talk about their experience of the fight," he explained.

"They would create a shared narrative which helped to process the trauma and bring the warriors together. The modern warrior, even with support networks, often feels isolated and neglected, and on returning to the communities from whence they came there is a disconnect.

"They are no longer needed, surplus to requirements. *Soldier On* is my contribution to help warriors with the daily battles they face on their return."

Despite navigating tough terrain the play is designed to entertain, using humour, warmth and honesty to lay bare many shocking and sometimes heart-warming truths.

The story, written for the Solders' Arts Academy, follows a company of veterans and actors who meet to rehearse a play about a company of veterans and actors.

Initially thinking they are worlds apart, the "theatrical band of



Jonathan Guy Lewis in *Soldier Soldier* and, right, working on the script



brothers", begin to realise there are more similarities between life in barracks and on stage than they bargained for.

Jonathan says the accounts of his characters and their life stories shine a light on the "very real and often disturbing facts of life" in modern Britain.

"We now have much more of an understanding of the existence of PTSD than we ever did," he added.

"The question is how we get better at moving beyond knowing and acknowledging to creating opportunities for veterans to process these complex emotions in a positive and life enhancing way.

"I wanted to create a piece of theatre that can sit alongside the other great creative work that is happening, that is both entertaining and cathartic for its actors and its audiences."

struggling psychologically'. "I have spent a long time telling soldiers and young people that the key to curing PTSD is communicating openly without any fear so I would be a hypocrite to just clam up."

Another member of the cast, Shaun Johnson, who toured Northern Ireland during 12 years in Royal Artillery, before turning to acting, has shared his experiences in a short film, *How The Stage Saved A Soldier*.

"When I came out half way through my time I really struggled and had 'mind frag' – mental health challenges – which I concealed for 13 years," he recalled.

"I was once at a bar in Hammersmith drinking with friends when I had a flashback to Northern Ireland and I started crying, feeling really ashamed.

"I battled this for 12/13 years thinking 'keep it to yourself don't tell anyone'. I couldn't hold relationships down, all the traits of hyper vigilance and an unsteady mind.

"I would wake up and think 'I have got nothing to look forward to' and it got really dark.

"I have seen guys take to the stage and give as good a performance as any professional actor – we need to embrace that and get behind it."

Tickets for the show cost £14 and £10 for serving members of armed forces or veterans.

**WHERE & WHEN:**  
● Exeter Northcott, February 22 and 23

One of the players channelling their experiences is Lance Corporal Cassidy Little, a former Royal Marine medic, who lost his right leg below the knee during a tour of Afghanistan in 2011.

Cassidy joined the Academy as part of his recovery but only recently noticed "signs and symptoms" of his own PTSD in the past six months.

"It's not even good and bad days – it can be moments – and the mood swings associated with this are devastating," he explained.

"One minute everything is perfect, the next moment everything is out of control – it flops back and forth; it's a really unfortunate thing for people to deal with especially if they don't know it.

"I have not been diagnosed but I am putting my hand up in the air and saying 'okay I am