

The former commando who turns words into ploughshares

Andy Salmon has turned three tours of duty in Iraq into an event focused on peace. He talked to Sarah Meyrick

“IT’S a performance and an experience,” Major-General Andy Salmon, CMG, OBE, says. “It’s the fusion of a personal story with original works of art and live improvisation.”

He is describing *Journey Through Conflict*, which is coming to the Church Times Festival of Faith and Literature taking place in Bloxham, Oxfordshire, this month. It is certainly an unusual event: a mix of storytelling, drama and reflection: not quite a show and not quite an act of worship, but something in between.

In the course of an hour, Salmon — the last British general in Basra — guides the audience through the three campaigns in Iraq in which he took part, in more than 19 years of conflict. Each of the three is illustrated by a work of art that has personal significance to him.

It is an emotional journey, incorporating the Islamic call to prayer, and told to the accompaniment of live music performed by the Australian pianist and film composer Tom Donald, and a singer, Nevroz Oremari, a Kurdish ex-guerrilla. The result is haunting and extremely powerful.

HOW did it come about? “It’s partly a matter of my own knowledge and learning, and partly serendipitous,” Salmon says. He had used facets of culture in his work to build peace. “Especially in Basra, I experienced using music to enable people to be in the right zone before dialogue. It was about solving problems, and making Basra a better place.

“The serendipity bit about it was Xavier Pick, the peace artist; [he] visited us in Basra, and stayed three months. He painted and drew what he saw; he had free access. He launched an exhibition [of his work from Iraq] in 2011 at Quintessentially Soho at St Barnabas’s, in London, and I was asked to speak. He and I talked about what lay behind the paintings.”

WHAT might have been a one-off turned into something bigger when, through going to church in Gloucestershire, Salmon heard about a new arts festival there, and saw the potential of turning the experience into an event.

“Our first experiment was at the Cheltenham Christian Arts Festival. By this time, I’d met Tom Donald, and Ismail Ginwalla, who regularly



Major-General Andy Salmon, a Royal Marines officer whose career in the military spanned 36 years

does the call to prayer for [performances of] Karl Jenkins’s *The Armed Man*. We pulled it together and created this extraordinary experience.”

Donald, who wrote the music for the film *Leaving Baghdad*, is an “improviser *par excellence*,” he says. Working with him released deeply buried emotions in Salmon. He likens the experience to jazz: his own words are scripted, and there are some boundaries, but beyond that what emerges is up for grabs. “Tom can be very purist. He won’t go into the venue beforehand; he wants to suck in the atmospherics. He goes into a state of high flow, and the effect is extraordinary.”

THE performance is moving, largely because he does not hold back from talking about the horrors of war. “In the first story, the Kurds were facing oblivion,” he says. “They had climbed into Dante’s Inferno, and they had to climb out to become a semi-autonomous region. For them, 1991 was a seminal moment of salvation in their history, even if they had to descend into the abyss first.

“And, in 2003, we had dug ourselves into a deep hole where the purpose and rationale was ambivalent and divisive. It was horrendous, and we had no resources to control the situation until we started doing the right stuff.”

So was it exposing, talking publicly about such a personal story? “Not so much exposing, but cathartic,” he says. “The story changes according to one’s own development. On my first tour I was 31, a young man in command of a unit with a lot of responsibility, working towards humanitarian support for the Kurdish people. It was a *Boy’s Own* story.

“The second one, in 2003, I was ambivalent [about the war], and I talk about that ambivalence.

“The third one, I was really seeing the situation through the lens of the people, trying to help the Iraqis. The purpose was for the general good, and ethical.”

The first performance played to a

full house, and was repeated by popular demand. There have been further bookings, and a theatre producer has expressed interest in a global tour.

PART of the mission of *Journey Through Conflict* is educational. “Unless you talk about it, people don’t understand. The purpose is to inspire people on to a better journey.”

The take-home message is one of resurrection, redemption, and hope, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. “The reaction [so far] is that people connect. It’s a full sensory experience. It’s emotional, and the raw singing touches people. . . People say ‘We never realised this was going on.’” One tangible outcome has been some positive interfaith dialogue in Gloucestershire between the Islamic and Christian communities.

So, what does he hope that people will take away from it? “How to make the world a better place — whatever that means for you,” he says.

“Today, in the current climate, where it’s easy to blame problems on everyone else, and we can become polarised in our own communities, we need to connect, to collaborate, find comprehension. You can achieve true serenity and joy and love only through compromise and

connection, by being open and transparent and showing love and trust to each other.”

SALMON brings a lifelong love of music (he used to be a chorister) to the performance, and also his personal faith. “I’m a Christian. When I retired from a lifetime [in the army] I reconnected with my faith. A lot of the creativity [in *Journey Through Conflict*] has come from the spiritual inspiration I found in my faith.”

It was not exactly how he imagined spending his retirement. “I woke up one night sweating about what I was going to do after leaving the Royal Marines. Then I woke up the next morning with five stories, and I’ve been able to use them in different ways. But none of this was really planned: it just happened. Doors have opened, and people have come up with ideas. It’s been about synchronicity and serendipity.”

THERE is another production in the pipeline, *Journey Through Conflict: From then until now*, although it is still in the early stages of development.

This time around, he is working with the one-handed pianist Nicholas McCarthy, who was inspired by the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, who lost an arm in the First World War. While recovering in a prisoner-of-war camp, Wittgenstein resolved to keep playing, and taught himself to do so with one hand. After the war, he persuaded a number of composers to write pieces for him.

“We’ve fused that with stories from veterans of more recent wars,” Salmon says. “They describe their own journey through the various stages, from euphoria and excitement to the harsh realisation after being wounded in conflict. You look into your own abyss before finding a different pathway.”

So what should people coming to the performance at Bloxham expect? “We want people to engage with it — to go with the flow,” he says. “I say it’s a bit like taking people on a magic carpet. It’s told in [the] present tense, and we don’t always know what will happen next.”

The Church Times Festival of Faith and Literature takes place from 16 to 18 February at Bloxham School, Oxfordshire. For more information and to buy tickets, visit bloxhamfaithandliterature.hymnsam.co.uk.

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