

Review of Raising Lazarus at DECIBEL Showcase

By **John O'Donoghue, Disability Arts Online**

Have you ever heard of the British West Indian Regiment? They were commissioned during the First World War. Kat Francois only got to know about them when she was trying to find out about Private Lazarus Francois, her Grenadian ancestor. Her journey took her to the Public Records Office, the Commonwealth Graves Commission, and back to Grenada.

In a late night showcase at the Zion Arts Centre, Francois told the story of Lazarus, and her attempts to raise him, to put flesh on the bones of a man who was almost written out of history. As Francois says, the history syllabus in the UK is full of Tudors, Victorians, Nazis even, but had nothing about the background to the story of Private Lazarus Francois.

Lazarus was shipped over to Seaford on the south coast of England after the King had formally welcomed the formation of the British West Indian. Lazarus met with the depredations of the British winter, illness, and misery. Francois wanted to know what would make a man want to fight for a country that wasn't even his, what would make someone be prepared to lay down their life for 'Empire', what would make him come half way around the world to go to war against a nation he himself had no quarrel with.

Francois turned up a number of poignant documents during her researches, including poetry written by members of the regiment, the reports made by the nurses who treated them for conditions like pneumonia in Seaford, military records of the men's service in Britain and across the Channel.

Francois is a skilled performer, creating characters as diverse as her Grenadian grandmother, the nurse who tended the soldiers in Seaford, and girls she was at school with – the kind of girls who give you a hard time because they think they can. Until, that is, Francois puts them right.

She's still putting them right with this production. As an exercise in recovering hidden histories which tell a very different story from those in the official text books this is a fine piece.

Lazarus would be proud.