



Artikel

Are We Really There and in Contact?

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Are We Really There and in Contact?

Staging first-hand witnesses of contemporary Danish warfare?

by Birgit Eriksson

In 2013, Matthaai and Konsorten's site-specific performance *War (You Should Have Been There) //3rd ed.* took its audience on walkabout in the Danish town of Viborg. The walk, guided by local residents, stopped in the city hall council chamber, in various living rooms of small private homes, and at a football stadium. In these locations, the audience listened to audio-recorded first-hand experiences of three men who had been involved as professionals in Danish warfare: a military chaplain, a war photographer, and a sniper. In the city hall, the priest talked about his deployment in Afghanistan with the Danish army.¹ In the private home, the photographer shared his experiences of bearing witness to the brutalities and casualties of war. And in the stadium, the sniper retold how he was involved in combat in Afghanistan.

The following year, another performance also staged first-hand experiences of Danish warfare. *In Contact*, directed by Christian Lollike and performed in Copenhagen and Aarhus in 2014–15, featured in performance three war veterans who had been deployed in Afghanistan with the Danish army. Here, the audience confronted not only the voices of the witnesses of war, but also the visible consequences of war in the form of their maimed bodies on the stage. The bodily presence was essential to the performance, which staged an unusual collaboration including a choreographed ensemble between the three war veterans and thirty-three professional dancers from Corpus, a section of the Danish Royal Ballet Company.

War (You Should Have Been There) //3rd ed. (henceforth *War*) and *In Contact*, the two performances that are the subject of this article, feature and in fact depend on non-professional performers. The six men in the two performances were not chosen for their acting or performing skills. They are not really there to act, but mainly to *be themselves*: men with first-hand insight into the conditions and consequences of war. They are professionals of war, not acting, and it is precisely the assumption, even the hope that they are *unable* to act in the sense of pretending or playing a role that provides the performances with a specific truth claim. Spontaneously, they seem closer to reality than a cast of professional performers who are expert at acting, but probably not at being poor, disabled, a refugee, part of an ethnic minority, or a war professional.

Performance practices staging “ordinary” or “real” people do, however, raise a set of aesthetic, ethical and political problems—still more so when the people on stage are vulnerable, perhaps traumatized. First, we may ask what the claim of truth and reality does to the performances as works of art. Insisting on truth and reality may seem at odds with most contemporary understandings of art as building upon an aesthetics of un-decidability, of contradictions, of dissensus, of open-endedness, of new social imaginaries, of possible worlds, of experimenting and anticipating rather than reflecting what already exists. How do the truth claim and the aesthetic form in the staging of first-hand witnesses relate to each other? Is it at all possible to uphold a privileged truth claim in a theater practice that selects, edits, arranges, directs, orchestrates and aestheticizes “real” material from outside the theater?

Secondly, we may ask what the staging of non-professional, vulnerable people does to them and to the

1) The war in Afghanistan began as part of the “war on terror” after 9/11 in 2001. With broad parliamentary support, Danish troops took part from the beginning of the campaign until 2014, when they withdrew from Helmand with the highest total loss of soldiers per capita of all the NATO countries involved.

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audience. My primary focus here is not the ethical concern of how to prevent the staging of vulnerability aggravating that same vulnerability. This is obviously important for any art practice engaged in people with real-life problems. But in this article, my concern is mainly with how the staging of traumatized minds and mutilated bodies affects the possibilities for critique. My aim is thus to explore and discuss the questions of truth claim, aesthetic form, vulnerability and critique through an analysis of the two performances, *War* and *In Contact*.

Theater of lived experience

Even though my analytical focus is on *War* and *In Contact*, the relevance of the questions above is emphasized by the fact that the two performances are part of a more general tendency to stage experts in diverse, often marginalized or foreign forms of lived experience. In the last two decades we have witnessed the “Citizens Theater” (Bürgerbühne), participatory or delegated performance, the theater of everyday experts, and verbatim documentary, autobiographical and testimonial theater—all of them genres that allow people who represent *themselves* to replace or minimize the role of professional performers. Meg Mumford and Ulrike Garde coined the term “theater of real people” as a subset of Carol Martin’s “Theater of the Real” (Martin 2013). They define it as “a mode of performance that is characterized by the foregrounding of contemporary people who usually have not received institutional training and have little or no prior stage experience” (Mumford and Garde 2015: 6). This foregrounding can take various forms in the many subgenres above, and “real people” can be represented (e.g. on the basis of interviews), recorded or filmed, or can literally appear on stage. But often self-representing people are both the artistic medium and material.

The new millennium’s resurgence of the “theater of real people” and the “Theater of the Real” has been ascribed to a desire for facts, authenticity, unmediated reality and truth in the era of “war on terror” (de Waal 2015: 16). When contemporary political culture is criticized for superficial events, spin and spectacles, when digital media arguably leads us into echo chambers and filter bubbles with little room for different or competing worldviews (Pariser 2011), a theater practice aiming at some sort of direct access to reality, diversity and authenticity seems an appropriate political response. In a political culture struggling with a democratic deficit, the “theater of real people” is often linked to an interest in challenging the nature of political representation and giving voice and attention to groups without power. In this way, enlisting local residents in staging artistic practices connects to a much broader resurgence of participatory art and culture (cf. Jackson 2011, Kester 2011, Bishop 2012).

All the potentials and dilemmas of the “theater of real people” and the “Theater of the Real” are there in *War* and *In Contact*. In the rest of the article I will focus on how these two performances handle the intricate relationship between truth claim and aesthetic form, and compare how and to what extent and effect they make real-life experiences of contemporary warfare real and present.

The witnesses of war

On Matthaai and Konsorten’s website, *War* is indexed under “projects,” “urban landscapes” and “performing,” but not under “stage” (Matthaai and Konsorten 2013).² *War* is not a traditional theater piece taking place on stage. It is rather a performative city walk (Nielsen 2016: 82) structured around three localities or tableaux, with playback of three interviews with first-hand witnesses and war professionals. We meet outside the city hall, where we listen on our own or supplied radios to well-known outdated Danish pop rock with hints of war while gliders from a local club circle above.

2) I discuss only the third edition of *War* (Viborg, September 2013). The first edition was performed in the small Danish village of Hørve. Apparently, there is no second edition.

We are soon taken to the first tableau, the city hall council meeting chamber. The air is heavy with smoke and the furniture is chaotically overturned, some pieces with bodies underneath. While the bodies (local scouts) slowly get up off the floor and restore the room to order, the radios air first a voice describing how the soldiers decorate their personal space with a “random extract of a Danish reality moved into some tents” (War interviews 2013)³ and then Jørgen Christian Madsen, a military chaplain in the Danish army. He talks about his role as chaplain, describing in particular three difficult situations. One is soldiers who have killed and seem to be cheering. Another is an incident where an Iraqi car plowed accidentally into a group of children gathered around some Danish soldiers, killing and wounding several of them. The third is his work at the field hospital in Camp Bastian in Afghanistan, where dead Danish soldiers are delivered in zipped body bags, sometimes with only the face intact or just an arm to be shown.

In the framing of the official but war-stricken city hall, the chaplain tries to balance Christian humanism and the national interest. It is not simple, as when he tells a soldier who has killed that “You may not kill,” but “that even though that you carry that guilt, then there is someone who is with you, and there is someone who gives you absolution. Ehm, and that is God” (ibid.). His hesitation is noticeable, and he does not expand on the Christian or ethical dilemmas but focuses more on his engagement with the physical and mental vulnerability of the Danish soldiers. They are clearly more his concern than the local civilians are, and in telling the story of the tragic car accident, his compassion is not with the children or their parents but with the soldiers who have witnessed what happened.⁴

Even though the chaplain’s job is to talk to the soldiers, not the locals, it is remarkable how he, in Judith Butler’s terminology, distributes grievability unequally in the story he tells. Whereas he identifies with the Danish soldiers who were exposed to the tragic event, the local children and parents seem “ungrievable.” As argued by Butler, the differential distribution of grievability across populations is decisive in war-making. Lives are neither lived nor injured nor lost in the full sense if they are not first recognized as truly living. They become ungrievable when they “cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in a war, nothing is destroyed” (Butler 2016: xix).

Of course, I do not mean to say that Jørgen Christian Madsen on an everyday basis does not grieve for dead Afghan or Iraqi children. But it is remarkable how his representation of suffering “includes and excludes, foregrounds and backgrounds, justifies and legitimizes” (Chouliaraki 2006, 162), thereby separating “us” from “them.” In *War*, his unequal distribution of grievability is clear. His national framing is even more visible in the transcriptions, where he ends the account of the accident by saying that he cannot give it meaning and that it would take psychologists to help “the poor soldiers” (War interviews 2013). These last three words are edited out in the playback version—perhaps by a director or dramaturg who wanted to distribute the grievability differently.

The unequal distribution of grievability is explicitly opposed in the second tableau. From the traditional political space of the city hall, the audience is now taken to the much more intimate atmosphere of various private homes on a narrow cobbled street. Split up into in small groups, we are seated in the small living rooms, facing a television screen showing only “snow” and listening to the voice of Jan Garup, a renowned photographer specialized in war and conflict photography. His perspective on

3) The voice belongs to the photographer Jan Garup, but this is not explicit in the performance.

4) I attended *War* one evening, and supplement my memory with photos and information from Matthæi und Konsorten (2013), videoclips from Christoffersen (2013), and an English translation of the transcriptions of the interviews from *War Interviews* (2013).

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war is radically different from the chaplain's, being simultaneously more personal and more universally humanistic. He has "seen way too many dead children" (ibid.) and knows that the hopes, the grief and the loss are the same all over the world:

that is maybe one of the greatest feelings of frustration in my life, that sometimes I get the feeling that we here at home in Denmark and the western world have the idea that our loss of people are more valuable than theirs, that our loss of human life means more than in other places in the world, and nothing could be more wrong (ibid.).

As a press photographer, Grarup is directly involved in producing what will count as reality for a public. His photographs will contribute to the visual framing of war they will influence "why and when we feel politically consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous sadism, loss, and indifference" (Butler 2016, 24). His role is emphasized by our hearing him against the background of the "snowy" screen in the private home. But he also explicitly reflects on how to represent and communicate distant wars and sufferings. He voices the impossibility of making a true representation of the consequences of war when he has to choose what to focus on:

If I walk around in a refugee camp and I know that's there's a child who's dying of malaria in a tent then maybe I walk goal-oriented toward the tent in order to tell you the story that children die of malaria in this camp. But then I don't photograph the ten children who are running behind me laughing and smiling (...) – for them it's the most fun thing that happens all day that I white man come along with pig color in his face. (...) Is reality that there's a child dying of malaria or is reality that the ten children are laughing and smiling (...) what is real and what is wrong? It's a very hairthin balance to navigate through and not affect what is happening in front of you (War interviews 2013).

But Grarup's dilemma is not just whether to photograph dying or living children. It's also *how* to represent the dead children. He can choose the compassionate approach, and photograph parents crying over the dead body of their son or daughter – a heartbreaking human loss that he expects anyone to be able to relate to. Or he can show extreme and offensive violence, by photographing what a four-year-old looks like when he or she has been hit by a hellfire rocket in the head, with no cranium and the body all burnt up. But he does not know if people can relate to that. His problem is thus both what aspects of reality to represent, and how to get these through to a public back home. And these problems are not just professional, but also deeply personal for a photographer who speaks about his medication, self-medication and divorces, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and carries a still heavier baggage of experience. It is equally impossible for him to communicate his experiences to the public and to leave them behind in his personal life, where visions of extreme brutality and violence haunt him every night.

By including Grarup's autobiographical narrative, *War* adds an important self-reflexivity to the idea of representing war. The problems voiced by the photographer – of prioritizing and framing reality; of communicating this reality to the audience; and of the uncontrollable impact on the represented people, the audience, and the photographer himself—are also problems central to *War*, and to any other "theater of the real." They are also problems that do not have easy solutions, as Grarup demonstrates convincingly.

The complexities of war

The third tableau is Viborg's football stadium. We arrive here after being ordered across a dark churchyard

and past an ominously crowd of silent motor bikers, their faces hidden behind visors. The atmosphere of danger and surveillance in the deserted streets is racked up in the stadium, where we are ushered into the center of the football field. Raked by stadium spotlights, through the loudspeakers we can hear the voice of Jimmy Solgaard Andersen talking about his experiences as a sniper in Afghanistan. The feeling of exposure, surveillance and vulnerability is noticeable among the audience. Based on conversations afterwards, I was not the only one thinking of the mass executions in a football field in the Srebrenica massacre of the Bosnian war in 1995. Nor was I the only one who totally disagreed with the subtitle - "You Should Have Been There."

Things are, however, not what they seem. We are spectators, not victims, and from the stadium's spectator seats we listen to Andersen while, absurdly, a group of cheerleaders perform in the center of the field, highlighting the gulf between these two worlds. His narration alternates between the good life in camp (looking at the stars, eating warm chocolate cake on a cold night), the pride of being able to shoot and kill a man at a distance of 1,264 meters, and the chaos of combat.

Literally as well as metaphorically, Andersen is caught with his pants down when the Taliban attack. He hears their "intelligible blabber" on the radio, but when the interpreter translates the words of the enemy, he learns

that they're actually communicating exactly in the same way that we do (...) it wasn't until that night that it hit me that they in fact was just as good as... some of them at least were just as good as we are. And... and I actually found that to be a strange experience that... because then you start thinking about: where are they coming from, right... what are they trained for and what is it they're thinking because here I'm sitting... raised in Mid-Jutland, with computer, welfare system, Grundtvig and a chest freezer, you know... what kind of people am I fighting?

And that whole... who are the good ones and who are the bad ones and all that.... really... 'cause it seems so pointless, right, because... what the hell! Then we're lying there fighting... and we could in fact (...) you could imagine that if we had met under other circumstances then we would have... gone fishing together or something. And now we're just lying around fighting (ibid.).

In this "pretty extreme experience" (ibid.), he hesitantly reasons that the Afghans, as good soldiers, also know what they are doing: "they were actually some people who had gained some knowledge and who actually meant/stood by what they did... who in some way thought that they.uh... were doing a good thing" (ibid.).

Andersen's narration leaves a strong impression because he so openly expresses the shaky ground for his actions. He became a soldier without "feeling that I have made any kind of active decision" (ibid.), he doubts that the Danish troops made any real difference in Afghanistan, and he needs the reaffirmation of the others in order to trust his own senses and memory:

the "yes, that couldn't have been done in any other way" and "that was (...) the right thing to do" and... 'it was definitely the enemy.' Not that we really have doubts but just because it's nice to hear that they agree too and that they don't remember it differently. Because it's a strange thing with memory (ibid.).

Even as a first-hand witness, you cannot trust your own memory. Listening to the three witnesses, the reality of war becomes more tangible, but paradoxically also more opaque. Moving from the chaplain to the photographer to the sniper, the certainty of interpretation, the representation and even the physical reality of the war become increasingly blurred. The chaplain does not seem to doubt his particular

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interpretive reconciliation of Christian ethics and the national interest, but confronted with children being accidentally mown down, he cannot give it meaning. The photographer senses the war and keeps it on his retina, but has difficulties representing and communicating it to others, as symbolized by the snow on the television screen. And the sniper questions the war's *raison d'être* and doubts his own first-hand memory and understanding. In this way, the "You Should Have Been There" subtitle does not cover his story either. He actually was there, but is not sure if he understands it right.

Taken as a whole, *War* suggests that the theater of real people is not necessarily a theater of reality in the sense that it has a privileged truth claim. We may interpret the conclusion as pessimistic, when it ends in the stadium with accelerating motorbikes and a live heavy metal concert under the spectator stand. We end on a hard, noisy, desperate, aggressive note – also a possible representation of war, but far from the nuances, reflections, ambiguities, dilemmas, vulnerabilities and un-decidabilities of the three witnesses. The strength of *War*, then, is not that it insists on an immediate true reality. Rather it's the opposite: that it refuses to give us a simplistic version, while allowing "real people" to share their diverse framings of war—and simultaneously showing the complexity and precariousness of these.

A war ballet

Like *War*, the performance *In Contact*⁵ involves three war professionals whose first-hand experiences constitute a central element. The way and the context in which Lukas Matthaei and Christian Lollike use these "real people" is, however, very different. *War* takes place in various locations in the provincial town of Viborg, and the recorded interviews are assembled with a long list of locals functioning as (mainly silent) scouts, guides, motor bikers, cheerleaders and more in a performative city walk. *In Contact* stages not just soldiers' voices, but also their living, wounded bodies, in company with thirty-three dancers from the Royal Danish Ballet company.⁶ Whereas *War*, with its outdated Danish pop rock, hesitant chaplain and wrecked provincial city hall, distances itself from any notion of national grandeur, *In Contact* was already inscribed in this when it premiered on the stage of the highly symbolic and prestigious Danish Royal Theater.⁷ On the national stage, *In Contact* – again, unlike *War* – received notable media coverage and in 2015 was awarded the best Danish dance performance of the year. Also unlike *War*, which ended in a (for most of the audience) uninviting heavy metal concert, *In Contact* seemed to create a special emotional contact with the spectators, who responded in tears and with lengthy standing ovations (Gade 2016, 42).

In Contact has the subtitle "a war ballet," and the combination of war and modern dance, wounded war veterans and professional ballet dancers, defines its aesthetic form. The personal narratives of the three veterans, Henrik Møller Morgen, Jesper Nøddelund and Martin Aaholm – including their military wills – alternate with sequences of spoken and written word authored by Peter-Clement Voetmann and dramaturg Solveig Gade and voiced by the dancers. Lyric and choral reflections on contemporary and future wars are interleaved with nuggets of fact like the recitation of the forty-six individual causes of death of Danish soldiers in Afghanistan. All the verbal elements are compiled in a montage with videos from Afghanistan, live drones in the dark, and music ranging from P. J. Harvey's war-critical *Let England Shake* and Beethoven symphonies and sonatas to Afghan lullabies, noise music and Maria Callas singing Bellini's "Casta Diva" aria. Compared with *War*, the music of *In Contact* clearly reinforces the feeling of

5) I attended *In Contact* one evening in Aarhus in 2015 and supplement my memory with a video of the performance seen at Aarhus Theatre, an unpublished manuscript, *In Contact manuscript* (2014), and information from the program and Lollike (2014). All translations except from Lollike (2014) are mine.

6) The ballet was directed by Christian Lollike and choreographed by Esther Lee Wilkinson and Tim Matiakis of Corpus, a part of the Danish Royal Ballet Company.

7) For an analysis of the national aspect in *In Contact*, see Gade 2016.

grandeur, beauty and pathos already established by its staging in the Danish Royal Theater.

In the main section of *In Contact*, the dancers and the veterans take turns on the stage, the dancers embodying women in burkas or soldiers in training or combat and their dance mirroring the veterans' chronological narratives about their lives before, during and after their time in Afghanistan. As the performance proceeds, the veterans and the dancers come more "in contact," culminating when the mutilated bodies directly interact with the ballet dancers in two very impressive scenes.

First Henrik, who has lost one leg, and Martin, who has lost both legs, dressed in shorts and T-shirts, take off their prostheses and, in an expression of extreme vulnerability exposing their bare and amputated limbs dance with two female dancers, one of whom mirrors Martin's ex-girlfriend while brutally dumping him on the floor. Next, a group of dancers perform a both grotesque and beautiful "prosthesis dance" (Gade 2016: 38), with prosthetic limbs attached to their backs or extending their legs. Thus the radical contrast between soldiers and dancers, already questioned by the dancers as they voice choral elements from the point of view of a soldier "we," is blurred and, paradoxically, also reinforced by confronting us with the visible difference between those who can leave the stage dancing and those who with the loss of their legs and their prosthetic limbs can only crawl.

While the physical disability becomes almost too visible in the confrontation with the competent and agile bodies of the dancers, the mental wounds seem harder to embody in dance. Jesper moves his torso in choreographed movements while testifying verbally to his severe PTSD and the subsequent loss of his wife, children and home. Hiding his face in his hands, he voices how he never fully left the war though he returned to Denmark ten years ago. Like Grarup in *War*, he is unable to sleep or be free from anxiety at home, and even though he is medicated against memories, he has "the war in the body. In the head. Every day" (*In Contact* manuscript, 2014).

If Jesper can be said to mirror Grarup's PTSD but in a more severely disabling version, Henrik mirrors Andersen's reflections on the enemy. Things are not as black and white as in the self-righteous official Danish discourse on the Afghanistan war (Gade 2016). More than anything else, the veterans testify to the difficulties they have distinguishing between Taliban and the locals, enemies and civilians. As Henrik says, "Taliban is ordinary Afghans," and "therefore, all locals are potential enemies. The enemy comes into being in the second when they attack us" (ibid.).

In Contact does not question whether one can reverse this statement. If the enemy comes into being in the second they attack the Danish army, when do the Danish soldiers come into being as *their* enemy? Is it in the second when Danish soldiers or allies attack them? Or do the Danish troops emerge as an enemy already when they establish camps in Afghanistan, a country historically invaded by foreign armies, and a population for whom war is a normal condition?

This question (examined in detail in Carsten Jensen's novel *The First Stone* from 2015), is not addressed in *In Contact*. Compared with *War*, Lollike's war ballet also lacks a reflection on the motivations of the enemy. In addition, the sufferings are mentioned only once, after the recital of the forty-six individual causes of death of Danish soldiers, in the laconic addition, "How many Afghans were killed, and how, is not known." The Danes are not staged as perpetrators. They are victims, first of war and then, as underlined especially in the case of Martin, of the Danish army (and the girlfriend) who dump him as defect, a problem to get rid of. The Afghan victims, by contrast, remain invisible.

If we follow Butler's argument that a war already begins when we construct the enemy (2009), then a staging of Afghan witnesses would have framed the war very differently. Even if this is very complicated, the distribution of visibility is central in a discussion of the uses of non-professionals in contemporary performance practice. This is particularly so if one of the aims of that practice is to change a specific cultural and political representation, or, as in *In Contact*, "to shed light on some of the bodies and some

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of the aspects often rendered invisible in official Danish renderings of the war in Afghanistan” (Gade 2016, 45). The stage appearance of the injured soldiers is a very strong strategy of authentication, which Ariane de Waal also critically discusses in her analysis of a British performance staging wounded soldiers (2015). Her argument is highly relevant to *In Contact*, where the our physical proximity to the obviously maimed bodies casts the veterans as victims while the pain and death they caused others remain out of sight. In doing this, they create a strong affective impact, but they may pull us so close as to obstruct critical and reflective distance (de Waal 2015, 17-18). The affective impact of the injured bodies leads us to identify with the veterans. This reaction is invoked also in the theater program for *In Contact*, where among autobiographical statements by the three veterans a questionnaire for a soldier’s last will is ready for us to fill in, for instance with who should be notified in case of our death.

Future warfare

In Contact addresses our tender-heartedness, but during the performance it increasingly also encourages reflective contemplation of late modern high-tech warfare. In one scene, drones circle over a dark stage, illuminated only by sharp flashes of light and screens with troubling factual texts about contemporary wars. In the final scene, entitled “Future War,” two female dancers (again on a dark stage, visible only as silhouettes) take turns to make short declarations about future warfare. They are talking about wars that the soldiers need not perceive as real, wars fought not with living bodies on battlefields, but carried out with robots, game consoles, germ cells, joysticks, nanotechnology, genetics. As the final words of the performance say:

*I am talking about an invisible war
I am talking about a war without loss
I am talking about a war without tears
I am talking about a war without anger
I am talking about a war without tears
I am talking about a war without end
(In Contact manuscript, 2014).*

This is a war without a clear beginning or end – a war that has transformed and expanded into being our normal condition. In the era of the never-ending “war on terror,” this is arguably already our reality. It is also a war in which the line between simulation and reality is no longer visible. With war increasingly taking place on our screens, we are in the dark, on stage as well as symbolically. The fact that we do not necessarily perceive war as real and do not have to directly take part also means that we can take part without knowing that we do. The war without battleground is also a war without geographical limit - and thereby a war in which *we* may be the battleground.

Through Peter-Clement Voetmann’s troubling texts, projected on the screens and spoken by the dancers, *In Contact* calls into question whether and how the high-tech war of the near future will create a physical and mental distance from the injuries and deaths of war. For these will still be there – they will only be distant. In the war without loss, without bodies and without blood, it is *our* loss, bodies and blood that are saved. Martin and Henrik probably would not have lost their legs in a future war, because they would not have had to put boots on the ground. Jesper might have avoided his PTSD, because he need not have seen the brutalities and the blood.

In this sense, *In Contact* seems to work against itself – and to distance itself from the identificatory appeal. It works both at the level of affect, in particular through the injured bodies, and at the level

of meaning, in particular through Voetmann's texts about future wars. At the level of affect, it works with an aesthetics of eyewitness and proximity to suffering, focuses on the sufferers' misfortune and vulnerability, and thereby invokes our empathy. This no doubt contributed significantly to the audience's unusually strong emotional response (cf. Gade 2016).

At the level of meaning, war is contemplated from a distance, giving rise to general reflections about causes, consequences and historicity. None of these ways of zooming in or out are, epistemologically, more real or true than any other. We may be more "in (affective) contact" with the close-up, but we may also find the distance more frightening and, paradoxically, prefer the wars with real, visibly injured bodies. Containing as it does both visible injuries and invisible threats, both a strong affective appeal and an invitation to critical reflection, *In Contact* is highly ambiguous – and thus it can embrace more of the complex realities of war.⁸

Staging witnesses of war

In contemporary culture, we are so overwhelmed by documentary images and stories of war that it seems difficult to make war "more real." That, however, is what *War* and *In Contact* try to do. By involving non-professional performers who are professionals in various aspects of late modern warfare, the two productions seem to offer an immediate access to a war that otherwise is normally both fought and represented using new digital technologies and media formats. Through their personal narratives and their injured bodies and minds, these six war professionals and the two performances (re)present war in ways that challenge our everyday confrontation with mediated conflicts and distant suffering.

In *War*, Matthaei enlists local residents and assembles recorded interviews with the chaplain, the photographer and the soldier in specific, "real" Viborg locations experienced by the spectators at first hand. In *In Contact*, the veteran performers, the dancers and the spectators are co-present in the theater. These differences of course entail diverse authenticity effects and affective dispositions. Regarding spatial framing, the main stage especially of the Royal Theater but also of Aarhus Theater create a grandeur, beauty and pathos that is reinforced by the musical and choreographic elements of *In Contact* – but partly opposed by, especially, the discursive elements. In *War*, on the contrary, grandeur and beauty are absent. As audience, we are invited not to admire, but rather to enter the "snowy" television screen, the unreliable memories, the muddy complexities of war.

Regarding bodily presence, the injured bodies of *In Contact* are in themselves a very strong truth claim. They invoke both our empathy and our admiration for the men who courageously bring their injuries and their extreme vulnerability on stage. In *War*, the voices also create an authenticity effect, and the absence of visible bodily presence is compensated significantly by not editing out the hesitations, the "uhm," the interrupted sentences. Though the bodies are not physically present, we can hear them through the voices, between the words. In this way *War's* recorded interviews have a stronger reality effect than *In Contact's* narratives, which are clearly more edited and more poeticized and sound as if they have been learned and performed.

Despite the differences above, the two performances have important similarities in their performative approach to the realities of war. Both *In Contact* and *War* insist on co-presence and co-creation: the former by assembling veterans and dancers, the latter by involving local people and local scenes in Viborg. At the level of reception too, they seem to encourage presence: putting us "in contact" and suggesting that we "should have been there." What they do *not* do, however, is to claim that this presence will give us access to a true, solid, immediate reality. In these two performances, such a thing does not

8) My analysis is here inspired both by Lilie Chouliaraki's analytics of the mediation of suffering (2006) and Solveig Gade's analysis of *In Contact's* ambiguous position between reconciliation and critique (2016).

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exist. In *War* this is because even “real people” represent, mediate and frame the war – and do it on precarious ground. In *In Contact*, it is because the close-up of the maimed male bodies and the distanced view of future wars work at levels that are not easily reconciled. What both performances do, then, is to render warfare more ambiguous and more complex. And probably this is what a “theater of real people” can do – give presence, audibility and visibility to specific voices and bodies, and thereby render both them and the world they represent and frame more multifaceted.

Bigirt Eriksson

Ph.d. og lektor i Æstetik og Kultur, Aarhus Universitet. Hun er leder af forskningsnetværket ”Take Part” og medleder af forskningsprogrammet ”Cultural Transformations”. Hendes seneste publikation er *Participation across institutional and disciplinary boundaries* (2016)

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