



Interview

My Deer Hunter

My Deer Hunter

Interviews with the Cast and Creative Team

by Erik Exe Christoffersen, Ida Krøgholt and Kathrine Winkelhorn

My Deer Hunter (2021), performed at the Edison, Betty Nansen's annex stage, is a documentary staging and almost an anthropological study of a group of PTSD-affected veterans based on a dramaturgical approach to their history and the consequences of their participation in war. Like any anthropological research, the process is a dissecting investigation of the lived life that is taken apart, fragmented and documented as narratives, choreographed movements, videotaped facial expressions and action elements. Fragments, lines, objects and actions are put together and become the montage of the performance. The reconstruction preserves the lived life of the performers on stage, but is also an artificial work on its own terms, addressed to the spectator.

The trick here is double: the veterans are themselves while at the same time being characters in the performance. The performance presents a reality without hiding its medial and theatrical construction. In doing so, it creates an affective space where there is a slippage between subjective and collective perception and between reality and staging. The performance simply comes into being in the encounter with the spectators sitting on both sides of the stage.

It is reminiscent of Odysseus' ten-year journey home after the Trojan War, and the four veterans describe a difficult and almost impossible return to a changed home. *My Deer Hunter* is inspired by the American director Michael Cimino's 1978 film *Deer Hunter*, about the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the traumatisation of individual soldiers. The four actors are Sara la Cour, Jonas Hjorth, Nikolaj Stokholm and Palle Würtz.

The Current Art of War

Denmark sent troops to Afghanistan in 2002. The political decision has been the subject of continuous debate. Was it the right decision? What kind of war were we participating in? Especially after the end of the war and the recapture of the country by the Taliban, the justification of the participation can be discussed. Did it reduce the risk of international terrorism? Has it promoted freedom and equality in Afghanistan?

How has this participation in the war been portrayed in theatre? Solveig Gade, dramaturg and associate professor of theatre and performance studies at the University of Copenhagen, is doing research on how the participation in the war has been portrayed in contemporary theatre:

“There has been theatre where veterans have been on stage: like Hjemvendt (Returned) (2015) by director Petrea Søe, where five actors with war experience, three veterans, an aid worker and a chaplain, tell personal stories during the performance. What they have in common is that the personal first-hand accounts come across very strongly in the narratives. The traumatised soldier takes up a lot of space. Not only in Denmark, but also in Norway, Sweden, the United States and Germany. It's really the dominant figure in European and American fiction. I think it's out of a desire to make war and its consequences present to an audience. I would also argue that the focus on first-hand accounts can more subtly be seen as a form of criticism of – or an invitation to critical reflection on – the sacrifices that have been the cost of the war. In these performances, the audience experiences precisely how major political decisions reach

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into personal lives. At the same time, you could say that by putting these people's experiences on stage, you contribute to drawing them into the public sphere and saying that it is not just the individual soldier who has to deal with the fact that he or she suffers from PTSD. It is something we as a nation have to deal with." (Solveig Gade in Emil Høj, *Information* 3 September 2021)

In 2014, the performance *I føling – en krigsballet* by director Christian Lollike premiered at the Royal Danish Theatre. Three veterans performed monologues in interaction with ballet dancers using mannequin legs and fake arms as props. To Lollike, it was first and foremost about giving the audience an awareness that Denmark was a nation at war and an idea of how "enervating and futile" the war could be experienced.

"I tended to forget that myself. In addition, I think it was important for the audience to come into close contact with soldiers who had lost several body parts and suffered from PTSD, in order to understand that the war was real and had real consequences. For me it was about making the war real, because I think it felt unreal." (Lollike, *Ibid.* 3 September 2021)

Phil Klay, an American author born in 1983, published the short story collection *Redeployment* in 2014 and his debut novel *Missionaries* in October 2020. As veteran of the US Marine Corps, he explains:

"When I came home, I decided to write these stories because I had something I wanted to communicate. I was far from certain what I wanted to say. I just knew that it had to be captured in fiction and not in any ideological way. As a returning soldier, you generally feel exposed in completely new ways and you ask yourself the question: Will other people respect me as a human being? What is my life worth? Will God hear my prayers? You learn to work from that, and it can actually be rewarding. The depth of your realisations does not necessarily depend on what happens in the war zone, but on the mental work you do in response to what you have experienced. Unfortunately, not everyone can cope with it. Home is where the reconstruction process begins. It is here that you realise that you have to find a way to be human again. You quickly learn that the rest of society is not orbiting around the same dark star. It's even worse when you realise that wars are dishonest or a failure. Or when a war that you thought was successful fails. My experience of war has evolved dramatically over time. Not just because I tried to think the issues through. I also travelled back to Mosul in Northern Iraq and saw destroyed houses and not much life. Those experiences changed my perception of the war". (*Politiken*, 16th October 2021)

(<https://politiken.dk/kultur/boger/art8407964/%C2%BBDet-er-dybt-bedragerisk-at-vi-bliver-ved-med-at-sl%C3%A5-folk-ihjel-n%C3%A5r-vi-officielt-ikke-er-i-krig%C2%AB>)

One can ask the simple question: can the theatre contribute to the reconstruction that Phil Klay refers to as a necessity? Can theatre, in addition to recounting war experiences in a dramaturgical process, also create an affective space where veterans and non-war participants meet?

PTSD

The diagnosis “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD) was introduced in 1980, in the wake of the Vietnam War, by the American Psychiatric Association as a mental illness resulting from war, and in 1990 a study concluded that more than a third of all Vietnam veterans experienced severe symptoms of PTSD. This meant that many veterans were able to receive treatment and compensation for their pain after the violent experiences of war. It also led to a reassessment of courage and fighting spirit. Previously, it was seen as a reflection of individual character and as a psychological resource that could be depleted. During World War II, there was talk of “combat exhaustion”, but this was questioned as an explanation for soldiers’ mental breakdown. Later, psychologists found that soldiers were able to continue fighting as long as they were part of a well-functioning military unit. The moment the military unit disintegrated the soldier lost that strength. The importance of the group on the morale of the soldier came to play an important role in military thinking and planning in the years that followed where the nature of war changed.

*The functioning of the individual small group became paramount. This required good leadership and a strong sense of community, with the soldier’s company or platoon becoming, at best, a kind of family. They fought for each other and even had to be willing to die for each other. In this perspective, the individual soldier’s morale is inextricably linked to the cohesion of the group (Johannes Lang, *Politiken*, 7 April 2022).*

Denmark has participated in various wars in recent years and each year commemorates its fallen soldiers, who are honoured annually for their efforts. However, there is one group that tends to slip out of the picture. Those veterans who have become ill from their participation in the war and have developed PTSD do not receive much publicity or honour. Some of them commit suicide (73 between 1992 and 2018), but they do not count as victims of war. Their act is individualised and it is made to look as if there is no link between the war and the suicide.

My Deer Hunter is about these veterans¹: Four veterans meet on a stage set up like a living room with a sofa, dining table, refrigerator, lamps etc. They are Jonas Hjorth Andersen, 33 years old, sent to Afghanistan in 2010, Nicolai Stokholm Sondrup-Ottsen, 50 years old, sent out in 1991, 1992, 1993, 1999 and 2000, Palle Würtz, 36 years old, sent to Afghanistan in 2008 and 2012, Sara la Cour, 35 years old, sent to Iraq in 2006. All have been dedicated soldiers. Whether their participation in the war has benefited anyone or anything is not the subject of the performance. They only represent themselves and their own identity crisis as a result of their participation in the war.

The Theatre Space

The spectators sit on either side of the living room and surround it as the four speak about their participation in the war. At the same time, they are busy filming each other. Mobile cameras are moved around during the performance and the four take turns reconstructing their story. Close-ups of their faces are projected onto a large screen on either side of the stage.

The whole choreography is like an operation with military precision that they could probably perform with their eyes closed. This is supported by a sound collage that puts the body on alert – and points to the readiness of the four ex-soldiers: they have the whole room under control and

1) Extract from a review by Erik Exe Christoffersen written for *Norsk Shakespearetidsskrift*, Vol. 4-2020.

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could find the emergency exit blindfolded, as they say. Sometimes they have to put on hearing protection and sunglasses to cope. Sometimes things get a bit chaotic, with chairs overturned, desert sand out of the sofa cushions and earth all over the dining table – as some of the more traumatic memories emerge. A deer from the refrigerator is cut up on the dining table. They continuously clean up the living room in a disciplined way. The war is still present in the more or less disintegrated domesticity.

The four have never had anything to do with each other before, but now they are together to overcome the traumas they each have suffered. As a spectator, you think it is brave to participate in the performance and to go so far into the vulnerable minefield. Will they make it? Can it give the spectators an insight into embarrassing taboo thoughts.

Between the personal accounts there are references to the film *The Deer Hunter*, 1978, about hunting buddies from a small industrial town in Pennsylvania, USA. The film has Robert De Niro, Christopher Walken and Meryl Streep in the leading roles. It shows how the Vietnam War destroys them. They are taken prisoners and the guards force them to play Russian roulette, but Michael (De Niro) manages to escape. After the war, Michael goes back to Vietnam to bring back the mentally damaged Nick, who is still playing Russian roulette for a living. Nick forces his friend into the final game, where Nick loses and dies on the spot. The four veterans seem to recognise themselves in the film's Russian roulette.

Homecoming as a Loss of Meaning

War is tragic in itself, but the stories become truly painful to witness when it comes to the homecoming. Returning from the reality of war, they find that no one understands them and few take an interest in their experiences. The euphoria of war turns into a never-ending nightmare and the body does not want to give up the extreme attention that war and survival demanded. It is as if there are enemies everywhere, any sound or sudden movement is sensed and experienced as if they were still at war: "I haven't come home yet," as one says. All four have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and are haunted by the war, living a kind of zombie existence where they find it difficult to be with others. They isolate themselves in loneliness.

Tragically, they all develop a sense of shame for having lost control. They share a sense of failure in the war, where Jonas lost his best friend. Sara, a sniper fires a discharge and feels she has failed in her duty as a soldier. Disturbed, lost and full of shame, she isolates herself in the Norwegian mountains when she returns home. Nicolai is ashamed of not contributing to the home, and every day he struggles with the fear that his wife will give up and leave him. Palle is ashamed that he still has difficulty hearing the screams of children at Tivoli, and he shows how he blacked out and curled up on his mother's kitchen floor. The shame becomes a trauma that leads to self-isolation and contemplation of suicide becomes a daily act: "I hope for just one day without contemplating suicide".

This is where the long and arduous journey begins. It is about giving up the identity they each had before the war and the identity that life as a soldier created, for better or worse, and then finding a new one. The performance is part of this process. Thus, they experience a theatrical community as something new and rewarding. The constant observation of each other through the camera becomes a visualisation and recognition of each other. They trust each other in their stage choreography, which has both speed and precision just like an actual war manoeuvre. It has otherwise been characteristic of them that they did not trust anyone after returning home. The specific relationships in the performance are touching, moving, sensuous and, one senses, an alternative to the endless

series of therapeutic sessions that all four of them have been through over a number of years. As a spectator, you just want to shout: Yes, we see you

Theatre as Community

Theatre is not therapy. However, this does not prevent theatre from having a therapeutic effect. The four soldiers have risked their lives without blinking an eye, but by going on stage – despite their anxiety, depression and other infirmities – they challenge one of the most common fears: standing up in front of an audience and confessing: “I am not a hero”, “I have to tell the stories”, as Sara says. At the end, she sings “Lo, the sun rises out of the sea” while the others hum along. The song becomes part of their shared story.

*Lo, the sun is rising out of the sea,
Golden rays are playing on woods and lea,
Oh, what joy and gladness, though all is still,
On each golden morning all nature fill.*
(Jakob Knudsen 1891, translated by J. C. Aaberg)

One can interpret *Lo, the sun is rising* as a religious use of metaphors, but one can also emphasise that the light lands on the coast of the world and the differences that the world encompasses. You can emphasise the physical and sensory relationship inherent in the address. I say to you: “*Lo, the sun is rising*”. There is a bodily community *here and now* around the act of seeing, as if the sunrise is a sensuous dance. The light takes on a healing function and dispels depressive thoughts: “And that night is vanquished, and griefs are gone”. The sun is a form of resurrection, greater than the individual subject, and by embracing this event it becomes possible to reconcile with death. *Lo, the sun ascends from the sea anew*. The song creates a community, so to speak, and becomes an important affect *between* the veterans and the spectators since the song is known by most Danes

Dramaturgies

There are several narrative levels. First, there are the biographical narratives, which are intertwined in their diversity, and where there are some common points such as departure, posting and return. Second, there is the specific camera work, where they record and question each other. This creates a choreography in the space, but also divides the spectator’s attention between what is happening on stage and the faces in close-ups above the stage. This means that the spectators see something that the performers do not see. This both reinforces an empathy in some situations and at the same time creates a certain distance to the action, which takes on a demonstrative character. Third, there is the parallel story with the film *Deer Hunter* about the Vietnam War, where scenes are repeated and discussed by the four. Finally, there is the relationship and engagement with the spectators. Perhaps the most important thing here is that we listen to the reality of the four and their struggle for survival on multiple fronts. They are not just representations of soldiers as such, but subjects in the theatre performance as opposed to the objectification imposed on them by the war. They are performers and take full responsibility for the realisation of each evening, which one imagines can be quite harsh.

Personally, I have no experience of war, but the struggle for survival intrigues and captivates me, both their personal stories and the struggle they are under taking right here and now on stage, which involves its own kind of risk. It is something different from war, but it is a courageous exposure

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and posing as who you are, without any kind of protection or possibility of cover. As Sara says in the play: it is necessary to *tell* the story.

Observing and recording each other creates a kind of mutual trust and focussing of attention and the presence of each person in the room. As one of the veterans says, the immediate impulse would be to escape from the audience who is watching them. Where is the exit? By staying, an experience is formed: the other is not dangerous, the spectators are trustworthy. A familiarity with the sensations of the body emerges and thus a kind of control of inner feelings, emotions, moods, etc. We survive this situation, which is super scary and anxiety-provoking, together as a group.

Theatre as Learning

The performance creates and shows respect for the performers. Tue Biering has made theatre with unique characters with a certain risk before. He makes himself available as the *ignorant* director and does not have the answer to what they should do to get their lives back and does not take a position on whether their actions are right or wrong. The dramaturgical and scenic weaving of the different narratives, video images and positions in the room seems to the participants to have created an alternative to more classic trauma therapy. This suggests that the medium of theatre can have an important healing and cleansing effect without being therapeutic. The veterans are not war heroes, and they are not judged on their personal efforts. But on stage, they are in a strong position in their encounters with audiences who might not otherwise have this experience.

In many ways, the last twenty years have become the time of affect. There has been talk of a cult of emotions in connection with many collective actions based on grief, anger, joy, pride, shame. Shame is an obvious example of something that arises from seeing oneself through the eyes of others, but which also becomes an internal state, such as blushing, stammering or eyes filling with tears. Shame is an interaction between the individual and the social situation. And it can be difficult to give a linguistic explanation. The affective can be linked to places, actions. The affective can express itself as a sentimental nationalism, a hateful and angry mood. *My Deer Hunter* is an example of the opposite. The performance creates an affective connection between the soldiers and the spectators that neither condemns nor glorifies the war and their participation.

The veterans

We set up a meeting with the four veterans who took part in *My Deer Hunter* along with the director Tue Biering. The interview takes place just after the performance on 2 June 2021 where we gather in the spacious attic around an ironing board. We talk for a good hour or so.

Let us start by introducing the main characters:

Palle Würtz, 36 years old, Holstebro. Sergeant Major, has been stationed in the Helmand Province Afghanistan in 2008 and 2012. Was diagnosed with PTSD in 2013 and started treatment.

Also suffers from impotence, chronic depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder. Served as a weapons technician/section leader. Marital status: Divorced, father of one daughter. Palle Würtz was discharged following a stress-related collapse in his office in the camp in the Helmand province. Würtz explains:

“Most of all, I isolated myself because I felt a huge amount of guilt and shame after being discharged. I felt that I had disgraced myself by giving up on the mission. I wasn’t invited

to the homecoming parade when the rest of the unit came home, nor to events afterwards. It knocked the ground out from under me because I had always been a central figure who had made things work. I had given myself 120 percent in the pursuit of rank and status, which is everything in the military. The army was my whole identity. That is why it felt like I lost everything when I could no longer be a soldier. In the waiting room at the PTSD clinic in Aarhus, we all sat looking down at the floor. The room was kind of permeated with shame. I think this is directly related to the fact that it is not allowed to show weakness or difficult emotions. I want to help break taboos. Show that it is not so dangerous to be vulnerable as a man. I would very much like to change the one-sided view of mentally ill war veterans and psychiatry as a whole. We have won the war it was to be on stage. On my worst days, I feel like killing myself. I have this agreement with my psychologist. I have to hide the keys to my gun cabinet. We are four people who are on the edge of life. We've hit rock bottom from different starting points, but we've all experienced shame, guilt and a bad conscience. I feel like I'm constantly being judged. But for me, it's not just on stage. There's a new stage every time I go to the supermarket or enter a family birthday party." (<https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/importfallback/jeg-tror-alle-krigsveteraner-ville-have-godt-af-en-uge-paa-teaterskole>)

Jonas Hjorth Andersen, 33 years old, Hornbæk. Has PTSD. Stationed in Afghanistan 2010 as a group leader. Marital status: In a relationship with Sofie since 2006, married in 2016:

"The contrast between me going to Afghanistan in January 2010 and coming home in August of the same year could not have been greater. Out went the boy, the idealist, the dreamer full of life and home came a man full of darkness and self-hatred. Every day I had to involuntarily confront horrific nightmares and flashbacks, and bear the heavy burden of losing in war. I had made a choice to try to make a positive difference, but that choice continues to echo in my life in a negative way.

I feel that in the small microcosm in which we operated in Afghanistan, we can be proud of the effort we made. We were there with our hearts first, wanting to contribute to the building of a new Afghanistan, naïve as that may sound. We were a tight-knit platoon, supporting each other to accomplish difficult tasks, even if they seemed arbitrary. There was a willingness to work hard and a culture that prompted us to listen to each other when we had been in violent conflict.

I have struggled every day since I came home, and a few years ago, it started to manifest itself as real progress. It has shaped a life full of reservations, but I try every day to turn towards the possibilities, just as I did when FIX&FOXY called and asked me if I wanted to take part in making theatre. This was also a decision that was to echo in my life, but this time in the reverse direction. What a gift it is to be allowed to create something beautiful out of the very worst." (<https://helsingordagblad.dk/artikel/krigsveteran-traumerne-fra-krigen-har-forfulgt-mig>)

Sara la Cour, 35 years old, Nørrebro, Copenhagen. PTSD: Diagnosed in 2013. Caused by acts of war, as well as harassment in a war zone. Posted to Iraq 2006, as a scout with primary shooting function. Only woman in the platoon. Marital status: In a relationship.

Sara la Cour today has a degree in anthropology and is currently writing a book about returning from war. She is a co-founder of the Foreningen Kvindelige Veteraner (Women Veterans Association), which was founded in 2017:

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“When I was stationed, one of the things we were told was that we were not allowed to run alone in the camp without a male companion. Even though the camp is a place where you should be able to take a break from the state of preparedness, we women were told that there was a risk of rape. Inside our camp. And this became an additional danger that you hadn’t prepared for. I have practised and trained before the posting that if I am shot at, I will be able to return fire. But how do you defend yourself against rape? It’s hard to hide. So you learn to adapt, blend in, become invisible. Hundreds of times I’ve heard comments like how many blowjobs a female colleague might have given in order to rise up the ranks. You will do anything not to be excluded by the group, even compromise your own gender. Because they were my friends, my brothers, for whom I would die. Even to this day, I would take a bullet for them.” (<https://www.berlingske.dk/samfund/til-sidst-aendrede-jeg-helt-kropsholdning-for-at-skjule-mine-bryster-og>)

Nicolai Stokholm, 50 years old, Horsens. PTSD. Stationed in 1991, 1992, 1993, 1999 and 2000 to Cyprus, Croatia and Kosovo respectively. Marital status: Married to Karina and father of three. Nicolai Stokholm Sondrup-Ottsen was among the first Danish soldiers to go to the Balkans. Today, more than 20 years later, he is fighting to be compensated and recognised for his efforts:

“When I say that I have PTSD, people almost start planning an escape route. I want to help raise more awareness of what it means to be a veteran with PTSD. Just because you suffer from PTSD it doesn’t mean you’re dangerous – it’s only the dangerous ones you hear about. I want to help change that. When we landed in Denmark, 150 soldiers sat in a huge auditorium in front of a commander who shouted out if anyone needed a psychologist or a doctor. If you had raised your hand, there would probably have been boos from the other 149. There was a clear feeling that real men do not have problems after a war. When I came home from Croatia, my old friends said: “How grown up you are now. So quiet and thoughtful. Afterwards, I realised that it wasn’t about thoughtfulness. I just wasn’t the same anymore. The first night I was home from Croatia, I asked my mum to close the curtains. She didn’t understand. They live in the countryside and the nearest neighbour is five kilometres away. But I couldn’t stand it. You can’t see who’s outside looking in. I was genuinely afraid of that. I feel most sorry for my wife. When I’m at my worst, I think she should move on and find someone else”. (<https://www.berlingske.dk/kultur/nicolai-kaemperstadig-med-sin-fortid-det-er-mest-synd-for-min-kone-naar>)

Karina Stockholm, 44 years old. Married to Nicolai (was indirectly involved in the performance, as Nicolai calls home during the performance): *“When I met Nicolai, he had already been stationed as a UN soldier in Cyprus. I heard a lot about that trip. On the other hand, we didn’t talk much about Croatia, where the experiences were much more violent. I didn’t even know what PTSD was. It was only later that I realised that there was something within him that we hadn’t talked about. After seven months in Kosovo, I picked him up at the airport. There was no supervision of how he or the other soldiers were doing. No-one phoned to ask afterwards. Actually, I didn’t really think about how he was feeling. You just had a daily routine at home, and he had a daily routine there. And Kosovo was so close. You could drive there by car. It didn’t seem terribly dangerous. So I just picked him up and we drove home. The first thing I noticed was that he slept really badly at night. Later on, he also became incredibly sad. I guess we just thought that it was a process he had to go through, and then everything would be fine again. We actually talked very little about what it can mean to have been stationed as a soldier. In 2013, Nicolai himself said that he wanted to call Svanemøllens Kaserne (Svanemøllen barracks) because he felt so bad. In the intervening days, I realised how bad it was. He really couldn’t do anything. He was lying in bed, he had*

violent nightmares. Sometimes he was completely distant. It seemed like he was asleep even though he was awake. That same year, he was diagnosed with PTSD, but the State Labour Market Insurance still refused to recognise it. This has been going on for years. I don't think can justify sending people out and then not want to help them afterwards." (<https://www.berlingske.dk/kultur/nicolai-kaemper-stadig-med-sin-fortid-det-er-mest-synd-for-min-kone-naar>)

Interview

How was the rehearsal process in brief?

Sara la Cour: We started in summer 2019 with interviews with Sascha. Then a three-week rehearsal process from February to March. Then a long break due to corona and finally two to three weeks before the premiere on 1 November. We played until 7 December and again in June 2021 with a tour in September. During the rehearsals we worked with dialogues, use of props, improvisations in small rooms, interviews with each other, where Kasper (the assistant director), who was with us all the way, wrote and wrote and was a rock of support in changing and fixing the script towards the premiere. Every day was very exciting.

We are interested in what this whole project has meant to you? What have the rehearsals been like and what has the feedback from your colleagues been like. What has happened to you – how did you get into this, and: What has it meant to you?

Sara: The Women Veterans Association received an email from Sascha Kempinski. She is a psychotherapist and caster and has had conversations with potential candidates for the performance. The message from Sascha simply said that they were looking for people who were willing and able to take part in a performance about veterans. I called Sascha to find out more so I could pass on the enquiry to the association, but then she asked if this was something that I could be interested in. I had an informal conversation with her and thought it sounded like an exciting project. It was important to me that there was a woman's voice in the performance. But what I particularly noticed was that our different and individual stories should become one common story. Building the story in this way appealed to me, and so I agreed to take part.

Palle Würtz was tagged several times on LinkedIn that they were looking for veterans for a theatre play. "When I was tagged for the fifth time, I called Sascha and said: Hi, I was also stationed. When Sascha told me that Sara la Cour and Jonas Hjorth were also in the theatre play, I said yes, because they are some of my friends. I reacted because for me it is important that these stories continue to be told so that the next generations of soldiers can learn". The importance that the experience ended up having came as a surprise to him. "I'm a classic West Jutlander and I have to be halfway in my grave before I admit that I'm in pain. Suddenly I was in an environment where it was perfectly legitimate to have my eyes fill with tears when I talked about helpless Afghan children. I found myself with others who were also filled with guilt and shame."

Tue: Nikolaj Stockholm was the first person we got in touch with. I was in the process of finding veterans, and you Nikolaj were in the first line, because (lawyer) Mads Pramming had sent out an enquiry to your network. Mads had warned me in advance and said that no one would say

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yes. Because it is fundamentally contradictory to ask people with PTSD to stand up in front of other people on a stage. I was asking some people with social anxiety, people who hate big crowds, to get up on a stage and do theatre. I was interested in looking at people who have experienced – and survived – a life-changing moment. I was specifically looking to talk to people who had been exposed to extreme danger. As a soldier, it's almost part of the job description. One of your functions is that you can kill other people, that you have some pretty critical moments where you have to decide whether to pull the trigger. It creates an almost Old Testament existential situation and a dehumanisation where you end up abandoning some of the principles that made you leave. I discovered that many of them felt trapped in very stereotypical boxes. They want to return to life, as human beings and as part of society, but they can't. Not only because the many stereotypical boxes hinder them, but also because they have to settle into life as a different person. They have left their old self behind. In that way, you can never return from the war, and that's what this performance is about. I thought I could talk with 30 people during one evening. Each conversation lasted at least an hour and a half, and I just sat there looking at my watch and the long list.

The project is five years old, and the premise was that we were at war. But when it gets to dealing with veterans who have been at war and had to revitalise something, the story is completely reversed. Nikolaj told us that as a child he had danced and acted in theatre. As the conversation is about to end, Nikolaj says that he would very much like to participate. This becomes the turning point. Suddenly I started to believe that it can actually materialise because he wants to be involved. That's how the project got started, and Sasha joined as a communicator of the project to the veterans.

Jonas: I got a call from Sascha Kempinski in autumn 2019. She told me about the project in a way that was intriguing enough to make me want to meet you. Once I was in the theatre space, I had no doubt that there was a lot of patience to listen, a lot of willingness to understand and treat it with respect. This is different from what you just don't want to be part of. Because there are a lot of people who want a piece of the action. They want a killer headline and something with meat on it, but not too much, or people will drop out.

Palle elaborates: "We've all been on a screen or in a newspaper and have been in the public eye. It will lead to some repercussions in the hinterland. Because we are part of a group where you don't talk about the group. I had to get over that point. Because once I do this, it's final. It's like you say, Jonas. Everyone really wants stories like, did you shoot someone, and what was it like when you picked up your mate in a matchbox? *That's* not what's interesting. It's everything that happens afterwards. Like when I'm standing next to a daycare worker and I suddenly go extreme and say, if you don't shut up now, I'm going to punch you. The nuanced picture is never told".

Perhaps this is also a way for you to get back on track rather than digging yourselves in?

Palle: There must be something that says that I'm going to stand up and say that this exists. We want to talk about everything in between. None of us have the solution or the right story to tell. We are only representative of us and we are four voices in the debate. I want to mention the first day we met up in the rehearsal hall at Betty Nansen. I remember I started by arriving five minutes late and thinking, fuck, now I'm out. I felt like now I to go up to Steven Spielberg and break through, because I really want to communicate this. Jonas sat up there and was cool, as he always is, and

Sara was there, and Nikolaj sat there with his quickstep shoes on. It was all so great until Andreas (who later left the project for personal reasons) said: Who the hell is Betty Nansen anyway? Tue began by saying: “You are the performance. It is your stories and your episodes from your lives.” This meant that Palle Würtz felt part of a creative process that had to get to the core of the story.

Tue: There were five rather determined people sitting there, but actually it was me who was auditioning. The four people had to agree to work with me. For me, it was crucial that the first meeting was as honest as possible and completely transparent. I need to experience that you can talk about the concept in a mutual understanding that everyone agrees that this is what we are working on. Sascha had done a lot of work, and she has written long files on each person. Because how do we put together a team with different types that complement each other at the same time? To get the big narrative, you had to complement each other. It was interesting to have the mechanic, the sniper, the lorry driver and the group leader. So, it was also a military professional supplement. When you arrived, nothing was given. It was also hinted that you would leave if I didn't sense that we could only talk for a maximum of 20 minutes at a time, then there would have to be a break. Maybe that's when I understood what PTSD was. One of the first things Palle said was: “I'd like to know who's on the other side of the window, and where does that lift go?” I had to run down to the basement and tell them not to use the lift. I was certainly naïve and didn't realise how impossible the project really was.

How were you convinced to join the project?

Sara: I remember Tue saying that he do not know anything about war and that we have to educate him. In the performance, there will be a before, during and after, and the performance will be like a journey. But we are the experts, he emphasises. It was a good anthropological approach to the project. I myself sat and watched the whole group. It was the soldier I brought into that space. I had to see if I could establish trust with these people. What are they after? For me, it was important that Sascha acted as a kind of translator all the time. Sascha read our body language and often asked if we were okay, and there were backstage interviews with her without the whole group. As a woman, I was right back on duty with a watchfulness for other soldiers. I encountered that jargon again, which I reacted to, and which you in the theatre also reacted to. But you always made sure to create transparency and thus create a safe space. For example, there was a round where we were introduced to all the faces at Betty Nansen that we would potentially see on a daily basis. You managed to provide a huge sense of security. Every time we reacted to something, you immediately showed that you took *it* and *us* seriously – like the elevator, for example, it was making noise and we reacted immediately and then it was stopped. I wanted to be fully informed about what was going to happen, and how and when ... well, actually I wanted a platoon leader. And you were our platoon leader, Tue.

Nikolaj adds that for him the most important thing was the sense of security: “A feeling that everything was taken seriously was established. There was someone who listened to you. It wasn't just a case of someone saying: “calm down man”. That sense of security tipped the scales for me”.

Palle adds that he really wanted to be selected, and there was an almost familiar feeling or mood among the team that we will take care of your story with love and loyalty. That sense of inclusion

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was very strong. “It was funny to see that Tue had set up a big table with a display of a lot of military toys and Tue says: See what you can do with that. There are also some cameras and coffee. Then we just started playing, and Tue sat there and said: what does it mean when you do that? But aren't you the one in charge, but Tue didn't answer. Well, what the hell do you want, and now you have to step up as a leader, and stop this socialist bullshit. For me, it was like stepping into a world of flowers, where I'm used to cold concrete. It became a free space”, says Palle.

Sara adds: “One of the things that was crucial was that we went into this together. I remember one of the first times when Jonas says: I don't want to do this if we do it halfway. I was actually feeling good at the time, but how much do you really repress? And when Jonas says that sentence, I can feel that there is something I don't really want others to see and hear. Because it's also about guilt and shame. I knew then that I had to talk about the accidental shooting experience that changed me, even though no one was hurt”.

How do you deal with this sense of shame?

Palle: I have always had the image of Jonas Hjorth that he looks like something out of an Italian fashion magazine and his wife is also 'irritatingly beautiful'. And for me it was like, “Jonas, there can't possibly be anything wrong with you”. And all of a sudden Jonas, whom I've seen at several veteran events, sits down and discloses some things and I think: Do you really feel that, and Sara, who I have always seen as a *superwoman*. It's Sara la Cour, she's fucking cool. Then the two prominent figures from the veteran community sit down and start talking about what they are ashamed of. Nikolaj also talks about what he is ashamed of. So I'm not alone in being ashamed. It was crucial for me to say yes to being here. I had been hiding in West Jutland with my shame and guilt that I went home just because my stepfather died. You can go home for a funeral and come back to the war in a week. You have to be able to do that. If you can't, you're a bloody wimp. But what has been revealed is that each of us has carried a shame that we didn't want to talk about.

Tue: The musketeer oath that was made that day was quite significant. Jonas says he is here because he wants to give 100 % and nothing less, otherwise it doesn't make sense.

Jonas: I knew that I would regret it if we didn't go all the way together. Because then we would lose the potential of the story.

Tue: Seeing how everyone clocked in on that was important. We returned to it in several rounds, where each of you could say: “I can feel that you are not here and that you are not going all the way”. That was our agreement, and it was another turning point in getting to where we were.

Jonas: It also made it possible that you didn't have an idea of what it was going to be. You, Tue, were willing to keep your options open for an incredibly long time. Probably even longer than we could have imagined. It took a very long time before we started to specify, and there was something we could relate to. But I still think it was important and helped shape the overall narrative that we got everything on the table. Then the big tidying up began: what do we choose and how do we build it up? A lot of things fell into place with that musketeer's oath, and it became easier to enter the very difficult space as the days progressed.

How did the concept evolve?

Tue had told the people behind him that he had now become a platoon leader in 24 hours, which was completely at odds with what he wanted to be: “But I realised that if this was going to happen, I had to do a quick training as a platoon leader. We started with some workshops in Øksnehallen, an old slaughterhouse in the middle of Copenhagen. I needed to get to know you better before we started rehearsals, so it took a while. Then we had a workshop at the Betty Nansen rehearsal hall, where I try to put some cameras into play. And finally, we also have a session in Sascha’s studio where I also collect material and we try to go back in time. What can we achieve when we try to reconstruct what happened? I needed to know if going backwards in time would work. Because I had two or maybe three concepts running at the same time and had to see what worked. But then we were stopped by the corona, fortunately. Because we were heading in the wrong direction, and that gave us six months to think. The first run-through had become very theatrical and illustrative”.

How did you arrive at the idea that the stage should be in the centre with spectators on either side?

Tue: We realised that the whole engine of the story is that people line up in an extremely pressured situation with the audience on either side, where there is no exit. The performers are precisely not supposed to be protected. They are supposed to be vulnerable, and what you experience is that people are fighting 1:1 so it becomes introvert and extrovert at the same time. With the stage in the centre and the audience on both sides, everything starts to unravel almost magically and more decisions become easy. Then the camera thing makes sense too. We spent hours figuring out the set design, and at one point we talked about having the actors behind glass. But it was too expensive and it didn’t make sense. You had to be extremely vulnerable.

Sara: Corona became a gift for us when we finished in March. It was incredibly hard to have to tell your story, and when I left the theatre, I felt like an open wound. Being asked curiously about the difficult subjects sets things in motion, and at the same time you could mirror yourself in each other’s stories. You were surrounded by mirrors and could always recognise what the others were saying. We were constantly exposed and the pause worked wonders.

Palle breaks in and says: On the last day before lock down, we sit and re-enact my suicide attempt with the shotgun, as if we’re talking about the weather, and then Tue says: Thank you. We’ll pick up on this tomorrow. Then evening comes, and the country closes down, and Tue has to make some phone calls.

The therapeutic process was not a plan at all, but suddenly we have been allowed to see ourselves from the outside and look in at ourselves. It has been a great gift that I could not have foreseen. Even though I’ve talked about my suicide attempt a number of times, I’ve never gone into depth in that way. I described it detail by detail. How I sat. What was around me. How I held the shotgun. It also made it tangible for myself, and was a big step towards becoming a whole person again. I would almost say it’s something all veterans should go through. Not necessarily on a stage, but a few weeks at a theatre school, where you learn some techniques that help you see yourself a little from the outside. Being able to re-enact my own experiences in a more theatrical setting has, in a way, allowed me to tell it more honestly.

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Do you have a sense of the audience's reactions?

Nikolaj: There are many different episodes. One major wouldn't leave until he had spoken to us. Another came up to us sobbing and said loudly: Thank you for what you have done. You've opened up everything we couldn't understand. When my own wife saw the performance, I was surprised that she cried for hours afterwards. She was so touched and relieved by what the performance visualised. This is a family effort on our part. I have been in therapy for 10-12 years, but *My Deer Hunter* has been worth ten times more. I haven't felt as good as I do now for many years.

Sara adds: "Your story has become more transparent. The whole concept of a before, during and after gives you an understanding of yourself, and it seems that the trauma is losing more and more power. Bringing your story to light is an antidote to shame. The empathy of the audience you meet every night is also important".

Jonas basically agrees. "There is great power in bringing the most difficult things in your life into play. There's darkness in it, but it's a gift to be available. I feel much stronger than the person on stage, and it's good to be able to say that I've taken back the power and there's a crack that gives hope to other people."

Palle adds: "There are several war veterans who say that because we have said it out loud, they now dare to open up about their shame".

When you film each other, you also see each other. In a way, you are kept in motion. How did you develop the technique that works so well here?

Tue: It's pretty funny, because it's very much about getting details and getting physicality and close-ups of hands and feet. We were in doubt whether we should have camera people filming, but then the camera became a way of watching, interviewing and helping each other. In film there's an expression that says, we're just going to do "a shot" of you. So the camera also became a weapon and a technique to show how you work professionally. But it was also a way of getting you to see what the camera could do for you. At the same time, it also serves as a transition when, for example, Sara has just talked about the accidental shooting and immediately afterwards films.

Sara: The camera took on multiple functions and became a navigational tool in the theatre space, but also a way to hold you to the fire so you remembered what you had to do. A lot of time was spent making sure we were filming from the right angle and in the right way. During the rehearsal period, we also worked on interviewing each other. And we did a lot of little scenes where we show situations. For example, I was Nicolai's dance teacher and Jonas was my father in another example. And then we went through the situations as concretely as possible. This has created this observational look at each other and a demonstrative style, where we have shown concrete actions that we have observed together. Many of these situations are written into the play.

Are they your own lines?

Palle: Yes and no. It's our own story and everything that is said has been said by us. It's like when you have a long, beautiful branch and you think it can become a pointed, fine, long walking stick. But you have to get rid of all the superfluous stuff. So Tue and his people sat down and cut. Then they came back and said, these are your thoughts, only now expressed with almost surgical precision. We've worked together on this during the whole process. But Jonas Hjorth and I have said to Tue several times that if you remove any more, you'll end up in a lime pit.

Jonas: We had to be co-creators and not just say what you would expect. It has been a process that has pushed my expectations of myself. I have been challenged. I'm not an actor, I tell my own story and I want it to be as accurate as possible, but it's been cut to the bone. I had to keep asking myself: how much can you cut without losing understanding? Maybe 90% has been removed.

You don't have to tell everything, and people experience things in different ways. But the audience just have to take it in and do what they want with it. But you're so afraid that when your lines are cut, the essence is lost. Even then, there was a lot of confidence that Tue and his team had worked with this before. The stories are interwoven, we are all senders, and then you get about 15 minutes for each player, which together make a great story.

Tue: Jonas, do you remember what you said to me on the last day of rehearsals? "Tue, I don't recognise myself here". But already on the first rehearsal day I said that there would come a time when you would say: "I don't recognise myself anymore".

Jonas: That was a difficult moment, and here we have to trust you 100% Tue, because it is so precious and there is so much at stake. The interesting thing is that you represent yourself here, and suddenly you see yourself condensed to something you don't quite recognise as yourself. But that fund of stories unfolds in a new way in the encounter with an audience. It's not just what we each say: the light, the sound, the movement, the music, the silence, the noise, the mess are all elements that help tell the story. I was more interested in the story and only later realised that it's the whole that communicates.

Tue: And that's when you start to recognise yourselves through the eyes of others. It's quite magical.

Jonas: Well, it's the ultimate release when you realise that the audience understands and has spent an hour and a half with us. But it's damn hard to believe until you stand there and feel it.

What has been hard?

Palle: Tue says early on in the process: "If you think I'm an idiot, just say so". What he forgot is that soldiers just settle their scores right away. At some point during the rehearsals, I turn round and say: "Shut up, you're a fucking idiot". And Tue replies: "Yes, that's my calling", and then we're kind of over that hurdle. It was as if it shocked the others. But we have to deal with these conflicts, and Tue has taken an incredibly pedagogical approach. "I'll tell you what". And then Tue comes with the big Rembrandt brushes and tells us a bit about how to condense ... Well, if we'd had an extra five kroner every time Tue said *condense*. But the cool thing has been to be forced to boil

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everything down and get rid of all the bullshit. Tue, you've just delivered the goods, and I don't think you're an idiot.

Nikolaj: The worst thing was when we were sent home, and I thought it wouldn't work out. But then Tue organised that summer get-together, and it was great fun and wonderful to feel Tue's enthusiasm. Then you believed in it again. Several elements have been really hard – including having to be professionalised.

Sara: The hard part has been showing the shame, despite the fact that I've agreed to that premise in order for the story to succeed. But showing it to the audience has been the biggest challenge. Personally, I have had the mantra: Sara, you are worthy of love, no matter how the audience reacts.

Palle: The worst thing for me is that I still don't feel that I have the right to be here. Tue can say it however many times Sascha can say it and my colleagues can say that I have a right to be here. But my story is not harsh enough, and I don't feel I am worthy of being in the performance. I feel that Tue had to choose me for lack of other participants.

(Tue laughs). It's the flip side of my (lack of) self-esteem that I came out of the military with. It's the demon I only got rid of by meeting with Tue. We were one-on-one and Tue says that I keep striving to be good enough. God, Tue feels the same way.

Jonas, what was the worst thing for you?

Jonas: I have a lot of doubts, but the sum of it is that it was hard not to be able to change the direction of this. Shit man, that's the hardest thing ever. It was my assumption of how it would turn out and my built-in anxiety and need to be in control of the narrative. I've had to let go of control and put it all in Tues's hands. That was the hardest part. Paradoxically, I thought I had done that, but I hadn't when it came down to it.

“The stakes are high. That's the headline.” Says Nikolaj

The continuation of the interview in Aarhus in October, where the performance plays at Teater Katapult (interview by Erik Exe Christoffersen)

In terms of theatre, the performance is structured in such a way that you perform a lot of actions. You are constantly doing activities, filming, sitting down, getting up, getting dressed and undressed, putting on hearing protection, cutting up an animal, barbecuing and eating, throwing and raising chairs, etc. There is a tight choreography. You don't just talk and what does that mean for you on stage and for your “acting”?

Jonas: It feels like a dance some days, where all the actions slide from one to the next. There are other days when it's a struggle. All the actions are synchronised, there's a rhythm, we exhale, and when we go on stage, it starts because there's something at stake. The performance has never died, but there are evenings when everyone is a bit dull, tired, and doesn't bring much to the table. But the fact that we move and circulate creates energy and concentration, it creates a rhythm for the monologues. The text kind of comes by itself.

Sara: Changing physical positions, working with camera positions and camera settings creates transitions, we jump from one to the other, new scenes. I remember thinking: what is the bridge between one and the other. But it's the small actions that create this connection. The fact that we are constantly in motion. It's a process, almost a dance, that we had to learn and incorporate almost blindly, it wasn't there in the beginning, but it was developed during the rehearsals.

Video cameras have become part of modern warfare. How do you see the work with the camera in the performance?

Palle: In the beginning we just had to use the video camera to play, and it was fun to focus on something. It's difficult to talk directly to the camera. There's a really uncomfortable scene where I have to look into the camera without blinking and talk about my personal shame about not being invited to parades. Tue was good at catching demons and cutting to the bone.

Palle: On the first theme days, I was the happy child, fooling around. The others were much better, and I don't deserve to be here, because there are many who have it much worse, I thought. In the performance, I'm being caricatured quite a bit to create a counterpoint to Sara and to reinforce Sara's statements. It's important to include it. You emphasise a certain side, and that's the way it is with everything.

Palle, you have a significant development in the play. You start out really cool and end up lying on the floor like a child. And at the end you're in a flowery shirt and say that the people from Enhedslisten (The Red/Green Alliance) might not be completely crazy. That's quite a development, isn't it?

Palle: That's maybe 85 % me, and I have to admit that I had never thought about what Sara, for example, has been through. So in that way, many things have changed for me.

Sound plays a big part and creates more shock effects. Do you wear hearing protection because you are actually sensitive to sounds?

Sara: Yes, I couldn't be there without protection with that sound. Imagine how crazy it is that you can't switch off a maddening noise and that you can't turn it down. Maybe that's also the feeling the spectators get.

Palle: When you [Sara] are smashing glass in a bucket, I can't see how many punches you're throwing, but I sometimes think, you have to stop now, otherwise I'll go nuts. One day I was completely shocked because I had forgotten to put on hearing protection.

Jonas: In the war, sound is a subtle undertone of dark depth. The performance creates a recognisable feeling, the feeling of not being able to absorb what is coming. It has a powerful effect.

Palle: Imagine a situation: we are lying in a camp sleeping. Then there's the sound of a rocket and your nervous system explodes. You've just been fed and you can't hear whether it's travelling this way or that. Your heart rate goes from 14 to 500 and it takes a couple of hours to calm down although

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it goes faster once you get used to it. Eventually you stop throwing yourself down. You lose the normal behaviour pattern, it's scary how fast it happens.

Jonas: You can't hear the direction of a rocket, it's completely impossible. It's like you're being stuck, you can only take it. You can hear the sound of projectiles flying past, there's a whistling sound, but you have no idea where it hits.

A spectator who is a relative interrupts: Can I just say: It was an fantastic experience, it really made an impression on me. It's insane what you've been through. You are entitled to be recognised. Thank you for that.

Palle: We also thank you for coming and saying that. It is good to get feedback.

(Nicolai continues talking to the person he is related to)

Palle: I can't concentrate if you are talking. We have an agreement that we are talking to each other, it's been noted, so can't you just step away for a moment so we can look each other in the eye?

I'm glad you said that. Yes, let's focus. Couldn't the Armed Forces or the Military buy the performance? Wouldn't it be important to inform about the risk that is always associated with war? After all, it is also expensive, with illness and families destroyed. You can't avoid war accidents, but maybe they prevent psychological breakdowns?

Jonas: I agree that this is an important conversation. I've been given quite a lot of speaking time at the Veterans Centre, they are happy to listen. I'm more doubtful that it's alive in the rest of the Armed Forces.

Sara: Yesterday there were veterans who asked questions: How were you cast? They thought we were a good cast, showing a wide range of soldier types with some common traits, but also many nuances. There are only four of us and it has turned out to be a good representation with both similarities and differences. It was random, and even though we are just representing ourselves, the performance strikes a universal chord.

What is your experience of performing and being on stage? You act with your whole body, and it's not just the lines you communicate through. Is that something you can feel?

Palle: If I'm not on stage, I can't remember the lines. The actions give birth to the lines and otherwise you start thinking too much. Nicolai and I have talked a lot and have had conversations after and during the process. I really thought I was at home in how I had it under control. But the performance has opened up new insights. It has taken up an enormous amount of space. I thought it would be like in the military: we come in, plan, rehearse, execute and finish. That's what I agreed to do and I had no idea what it would entail and what it would come to mean. I have given many talks, but theatre and the interaction between camera, sound and music is something special, and I would like to use the format in other contexts. I want to have a dialogue, not just send people out the door. I'm in love with theatre, but if I were to do something, it would have to be more

dialogue-based, where people come down and talk on stage. I was burning out on giving talks, but I've got the energy to do it again.

Jonas: My sense of the audience is that the most powerful experiences take time. I've never gone out of the room and asked the audience what they've experienced, I wouldn't demand that of people. We are different in that respect.

Palle: I would like to know something about what they have experienced, also to let them know that we take their experiences seriously. It's important to give a nuanced picture of mental illness. My stage is not just a theatre stage, it's every time I step out the door. I'm acting every day when I'm pretending everything is okay. It's an invisible handicap.

In war, you take responsibility for each other, the group and the mission. Is taking responsibility in war transformed into taking responsibility for each other on stage?

Palle: It's a part of the military where you learn from the first hour that you are part of a community. You learn that you are solving a mission, and we are trained to give constructive feedback.

In the theatre, you don't get shot down, but you can still be humiliated by the audience? What is your experience of working together on stage?

Sara: We have each other's back, we have promised each other that; we are there together and we really need that. It allows us to bring a nerve into the room, even when it's difficult. It can be on the edge, but we have been able to solve it.

Jonas: We give each other space on stage and check in together: how are things today?

Palle: Responsibility and respect go across rank. You check in on each other. No matter where you are in the system, you have to take responsibility for yourself and your colleagues.

Sara: We have a task to fulfil, a function that requires you to be top-tuned. You need fuel, extra ammunition, water and much more, and I have personally had a feeling, even when it has been a struggle to be on stage, like today, when my symptoms are more pronounced, that it is a failure not to solve the task. You shouldn't be self-sacrificing, but when it's a matter of life and death, you have to sacrifice yourself and put your emotions aside like a machine where the cogwheel has to work. Here we have supported each other, we do the task together and I fulfil my function. There is this mechanism we use to work together. We only realised it when we were dealing with it.

Palle: And we had to say to Tue, if you have a plan, you have to communicate it more clearly.

Jonas: But it's important that I'm in touch with my feelings, and even though today it's at a distance, my experiences are still vivid. I can feel it every time we play. If I can't feel the things that hurt, I wouldn't be able to participate. It's just here and now in me, it's not routine. Revisiting the breakdown and the depression, I have felt it more than I thought. But we have learnt to solve it on stage, we have faith in each other, and we have no doubt that someone else will take over if

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you are down. We've had days where we struggle to revisit it. We can't play quite the same, even though it might be 90 per cent in place. It might be something with a breath or a pause, and we have exit strategies in place. We can stop the performance with a sign to the director if we need to. It's a psychological help, even if we won't need it. It's a victory that we make it on stage and with the people behind it, and we win over the demons.

How have you experienced playing the performance?

Sara: Theatre is powerful. There is an opportunity to tell stories raw, but in an artistic framework so that it can also be digested. This play is raw and honest. Nothing is black and white. I am one of many nuances in the story of Denmark's stationed soldiers. I hope this play will enrich and touch the audience. It enriches and touches me to be on stage with the other three nuances.

Jonas: We take back the power over our lives, so that it doesn't become something we have to rattle off. Thank you, Tue for this opportunity. It's a privilege to step into this theatre world, they have done everything to make us good, and to bring out what is important to talk about. It shifts the perspective, and it can be good if I can keep challenging myself.

Can you use these experiences with theatre in your daily life as veterans?

Jonas: We have received different feedback from veterans who can recognise themselves and who might be able to pick it up and start a process with themselves. But there are also relatives and people who have been involved, and it's great to hear them say: "it helps to understand some of the things that were previously difficult to understand". A lot has happened along the way, it's a living performance. I had hoped that it would bring things to a close. I want to communicate and become good at it. It was a gift to be involved and tell a story and make others understand what I have experienced. Theatre has a power and the audience may learn something, but the story of "Jonas" in the performance is retrospective. I am in a different place today. I work every day to move on, to get better, and I still want to finish this story. The theatre validates my need. Who you are, where do you come from? We learn something about theatre as a craft and a way of telling stories, but I feel like I want to make it bigger. Theatre is amazing but it has a limited audience. We've done 48 performances with 90 spectators. That's about 4000 spectators. That's a small number of people and I would like to take it beyond this limited medium. It could be interesting to use some of the things we have learnt in another medium. Too few people get the opportunity to see this. I want to continue my story and the process has made it possible that perhaps it can be finalised. I look forward to being allowed to say the last word and go out as a different person.

Interview with Nicolai December 2021 by Erik Exe Christoffersen

In the first version, Karina (Nicolai's wife) was in the play on her mobile phone and she was called from the stage. How did you come up with that idea?

During rehearsals I suggested that we could call Karina and she would be better at telling the story, and Tue thought we could do that in the performance as well, and it worked fine. There was only one night when I couldn't get through, and I just talked about our conversations. It gave me terrible

anxiety, and I my hands were shaking before she answered her mobile phone. I asked her if she remembered when I went to Kosovo, we had just gotten married and neither of us knew what the mission was. There were a lot of emotions at stake, I didn't know what I was going down to, you don't know till you're standing there. Many of the spectators asked if it was true, was it real that I called her. People wondered, because there were many other elements that were recorded on tape. In fact, we could have done that.

What did you do when she went to see the performance? Was she able to respond in the audience?

Tue was afraid that it would be too theatre-like, so that it would become strange. So instead, I talked about the departure myself. But the situation became almost a family situation. I called at the same time every night within two minutes, so it was very tight, the children switched off the TV and looked after each other, so it became a family effort. We subsequently separated and I have no doubt that the performance also led to the divorce. When she saw it, she was completely distant and cried bitterly. Maybe some things fell into place. My PTSD is for the rest of my life, it's chronic. Maybe because too many years went by before I got treatment. I'll never recover and I'm still in treatment after 18 years. The first few years were just symptom management, and I was in and out of treatment. It wasn't until 2013 that I got help, and my counsellor calls me every week to see how I'm doing. If I'm not feeling well, we talk for a couple of hours. I tried not to be so horrible to live with, but I have been my own worst enemy. I beat myself up because I got so angry about not being able to make things work. I've managed to knock myself out like a light and I'm an old boxer. It's a shame it ended up like that, I would have liked to have avoided it. But it's also hard to say whether it's really okay and necessary in order to move on. I'm not sure that it's all bad. So even though I have felt sorry for myself, I've had to decide what I want to do in the future. I've got an apartment, and even though there's no furniture yet, it works: we sit on the floor, it's comfortable. My middle daughter is 15 years old. She's interested in art, Asian art and Japanese comics, and she's going to a boarding school where they'll be travelling to Japan and Korea. I'm fine with that, but it costs a fortune. By the way, we might be travelling to Korea with the performance next year. For a theatre festival. I hope so, Tue is travelling all the time. I'm a bit worried, he's at a dangerous age, he's a hypochondriac, he's afraid of freezing, I've tried to explain to him that that's not what makes you ill.

Are there any incidents from the specific rehearsal situations you can tell us about?

I'll never forget the start of the rehearsals. When we met, Tue had set up a play table with buildings, soldiers, trains and a couple of toy tanks that could shoot small bullets. We were just supposed to play. I thought, don't they have a script? It was really weird, but as it progressed it got exciting because we started using this set-up: they asked questions and let us talk and they wrote down. There was a situation where we had to smash plates and a situation where we had to recreate sounds and smells, and that came on stage. The noise created a kind of panic, all four of us reacted. It was too violent. We had to wear ear protection and it became a scene.

It were different experiments that led us to have the audience on both sides of the stage. In the beginning we were on the big stage, where we disappeared from the audience. We went down to a smaller number of spectators, but I think it made the performance much better because we had a greater proximity and contact with the audience. Andreas unfortunately ended up not being in

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the performance. I really liked him and he had an important story that we didn't get to tell. Right up to the first day of the premiere, I was still afraid that they would come and say that we had to cut down to three and you shouldn't be in it. It turned out that Palle felt the same way, but not Jonas and Sara, I think.

But was it otherwise a trusting space in relation to the theatre?

It was, but there's also the ghost of PTSD that keeps telling you that you're not good enough. Even though we were in a safe space, there was always a ghost tapping you on the shoulder.

Is it something about being unsure of who and what you can trust, and always being a bit suspicious?

I have two dogs: one on each shoulder, depression and PTSD, and they take turns demanding attention. Sometimes they are sweet little lap dogs and at other times, they are ferocious beasts, and that's how I view the illness. During the rehearsals, the PTSD dog was there all the time, telling me that I wasn't good enough. There was always an activation of my PTSD dog. It's a way to illustrate and visualise my problem, and it works. When I feel bad, I think about the dogs trying to pull me down. I try to deal with it. It might be something that has affected me through a smell, a sound or a mood. The dog can be vicious and your best friend. The depression dog can be annoying and will bite and destroy. It's horrible and you have to really struggle to keep it down. I do exercises and it helps to focus. When we were rehearsing and later when we performed, we did exercises every day. When I got home, I was on a high, for better or worse. There were two times when things went wrong during the performance and I started crying and couldn't stop. I had a hard time when I told my story, and right after, Jonas talked about his platoon leader who died. I felt sad every time Jonas told his story. A couple of times I just couldn't stop crying and Jonas grabbed me from behind and asked if we should stop. But after a hug, I got it under control and we could continue playing. He whispered: "It's going to be okay". I wasn't expecting that and I calmed down. We may not meet again in the future, but there will always be a special connection between us. In the beginning, I didn't think I could trust the others who were young, but that definitely changed. I've told Palle that he shouldn't have been sent out after the first trip. The system is not good enough at assessing that kind of thing. I was on five trips, but especially after the third trip, I shouldn't have been sent out. Several people have been sent out even though they weren't ready for it. There was one who cut himself in the arm to show that he could take the pain. He was sent home, but is still in the military. That's the military in a nutshell.

The process and the performances were risky. Was the risk too big considering your situation?

Sascha was a safety net and if anything came up, we could talk to her. I also had my own psychologist who I talk to on a regular basis. So, considering how little they knew at the theatre, it was okay. We had a safety line during the performances and could put a purple post-it on the fridge and the theatre manager would say there were technical problems and maybe cancel if necessary. Fortunately, it was not necessary. We are different, yet we have the same problem and we know each other in a different way because our experiences are close to each other. It's sad, it's a waste of life, and I wish there had been more help. By the way, my injury has again been rejected as an occupational injury by the State agency, even though I have three medical certificates documenting that I have severe

PTSD. They think it's because my mum died. It's true that it broke me, but it was like the straw that broke the camel's back. I'll probably have to file a lawsuit about this.

You are yourselves on stage, but at the same time you are a character, how do you experience this duality?

The first time they came with a script, I thought it was something completely different from what we had told them. Jonas was about to drop out because of the way it was written. But it wasn't too bad, and it turned out well in the end, but it was difficult.

Was it because you also became characters and not just yourselves?

It was hard to accept those roles. I'm glad I'm not the one who got Palle's role, I would have had a hard time with that. A lot of people thought he was terrible in the beginning, but in the performance it turns out that he also writes poems in a flowery shirt. It was a good way to bring that out. During rehearsals he had to lift Sara once, just like he says he did with his girlfriend. Sara was scared of him and he was upset that she was scared of him.

In re-enacted situations?

Yes, and it was changed many times while we were rehearsing. The dramaturge, Tanja Diers, wrote everything down and then came up with a manuscript that we had to say exactly as it was written to make sure people got everything.

You had to reinvent yourselves?

Yes, we reinvent ourselves. But we had to be both as we were and as we are now.

I guess the performance is also a good proof that you have a certain control over yourselves despite your diagnoses. It will be a demonstration of what you can achieve under the right circumstances?

We only had one cancellation where I was hospitalised due to kidney problems, the next day I was back on track. We haven't cancelled anything because of PTSD. Every night when we stood in the dark and went on stage, we were electric. It was at every performance. It was a total adrenaline rush. I miss that.

What convinced you to join the project?

I wanted to tell people that PTSD is not as dangerous as some may think. When Karina said she wanted a divorce, a rumour started in our circle of friends and family. But I have never acted destructively towards my family. When I feel really bad, I hide under the covers, and I can get furious that someone might think that because you are a veteran and suffer from PTSD, you are dangerous. I am tired of those who almost run away if they hear that you have PTSD. Of course, it's because there have been cases where veterans have gone crazy, but that's because they didn't get help, I think. Tue called and inquired about how we veterans were doing. When the conversation was

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almost finished, he said: now I have what I need, and I told him that I would like to participate. I used to be a sports dancer and I'm not afraid of the stage and Tue said: We would like you to join us.

Interview with Sara la Cour December 2021 by Erik Exe Christoffersen

Can you describe some of the exercises you did in the rehearsal process. And how they worked for you?

Yes, there's a scene where we sit across from each other and have to play Russian roulette. And we're just suggesting that. Several scenes are based on exercises where we use the interview method. We ask each other a question and we get an answer. Or we recreate a situation and let Jonas be the father: I ask: "Where did he stand in relation to you?" and we imitate situations. We used an interview format: I look at Jonas through the camera and ask "What were you thinking just before you left?" Tue let the conversation continue and he let us talk in a safe space, where we also made the rules of the game with Tue as the conductor.

There were also situations where the acting and the demonstration could become transgressive. For example, there is a scene in the play where Palle is lying down and talks about how he can go crazy, as when he smashed his ex-girlfriend's door in a fit of rage, and also in rage shouts to the daycare worker that he can try to put a gun to her head. He used me to imitate the situation by putting two fingers to my temple and pressing against my head. That was too much for me and we moderated the scene so that he doesn't touch me with his fingers imitating the gun, but just points in the air. We understood that we had to tell stories and at the same time talk about what we had seen, the sounds we heard, the flavours, all the sensations. We also used all sorts of props to describe our experiences as vividly as possible. Little toy soldiers used to show a fire attack. Toast that became the farewell dinner, a table, a refrigerator that suddenly turned into a forest. We didn't use costumes. On stage they made areas and rooms with chairs, with a bed, an armchair. Slowly more was added. For example, if you said: "It was just wild with Coca Cola in the desert", Tue could pick it up, and the next day, there was a box of coke. A screen was put up so that you could see what we were filming. Tue suggested: "Try filming hands, feet, whatever you want to see, create images with symbolism". These were small signals that could support actions: Nicolai's feet when he was fidgeting and maybe did a little dance step, fumbling hands. These were good exercises that also made you aware of your own actions. It was a way to trigger our memory.

And accessing emotions and moods?

It's probably a therapeutic approach, yes. I have gained access to events that I thought had been processed and that I had to continue working on. There was one situation in particular where I had a camera focussed on me while I was talking about something I overheard on the radio. I felt extremely vulnerable. I hear my closest soldier colleagues talking about me in a sexualised way on the radio line. "Where were you? Where were you going on the patrol? What did they say specifically?" Tue asked, and I had to repeat it with the camera on me. I really got a feeling of being back there, and I felt totally exposed and insecure. When I was being filmed with a camera, I couldn't move if I needed to. I was completely exposed. I was sorry to make a fuss because Tue just wanted to make good theatre, as he said. He was into the story and forgot to listen. There were a few times when he turned into a theatre director, who has had to create the best product.

I actually have a rule that I don't share things that are unprocessed. I've admitted: "It was that mistake with the accidental shot" and I've said everything you can say to yourself. I have been sick with shame and been the worst judge. In many ways I have made peace with that accidental shot. I made a mistake, I'm not perfect, I'm just human. I am very conscious of that, and therefore it can be revealed that I made a mistake, and even though it still affects me, I have worked through the shame of it. There are situations that I am still working on, and experiences that feel overwhelming to have to talk about in a situation where I am completely exposed on stage. There are many events I haven't talked about. Stories that could be a play in themselves. Tue has focussed on the hero's journey: we went out into the world, it cracked and was recreated. In the beginning he was very interested in the event itself, the moment, where we broke. But there is not one event, there are many. We needed to put more words to our journey, but of course there have been differences in how much we have needed to put our experiences into words.

Were there any situations where your boundaries were crossed?

There were two situations in particular where I left the stage and thought, what am I doing? It was important that Sascha kept an eye on us. We checked in every day to see if there was anything we needed to be aware of, such as "I didn't sleep last night, so I'm a bit more on edge". During the rehearsals we had one in-depth conversation with Tue with Sasha present. This had the effect that I could feel safe because she could intervene on my behalf, and at the same time Tue could dare to take a step closer to the events, so it worked both ways. When there was something at stake or I felt something was transgressive, I could pull Sascha into the more vulnerable situations. I have had anxiety attacks that sat in my body all day, so we had to stop early, but I could put it into words, so I wasn't afraid that it would escalate. There have been situations where my body reacted. When the anxiety comes, I am without judgement and become detached from reality. My body reacts as if I am in extreme danger and goes into a kind of spasm, which I have gradually learnt to fight with and not fight against. I have a feeling of not being able to breathe. I hyperventilate and feel a tingling in my fingers, and if it escalates, I lose my hearing and my windpipe constricts. But I've been able to tell Sascha: "I feel bad and need a break". Sascha has been invaluable. She has talked to each of us individually and together and ensured that the necessary considerations were made. There were many things at stake, and she was Tue's mouthpiece so that he could focus on the theatrical side of things. Later in the process, Sascha trained the performance manager so that she could also check in with us.

Interview with Sascha Kempinski by Erik Exe Christoffersen

Sascha Kempinski is an intimacy coordinator and psychotherapist specialising in topics such as self-esteem, boundaries, intimacy, contact and self-support. The work can be meetings with the director, producer or other relevant people about the intimate scenes and the thoughts around them, already in the casting process where tasks and expectations are aligned. She helps prepare the actor mentally and physically for the intimate scenes and ensures a safe working environment. Finally, Kempinski helps to ensure debriefing afterwards, and that the ethical guidelines established by the production company are followed.

How did you get involved with FIX&FOXY? How is your task defined, what problems have you solved?

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I've had nothing to do with theatre before, so it was a culture shock. I've been doing TV for many years and have been a psychotherapist since 2014. A colleague contacted me and asked if I could help Tue. He's a bit strange, I was warned. Tue needed someone who could cast and organise the process for vulnerable people with PTSD. We met and were soon in a close partnership. He was good at involving me and not afraid to let go and give me responsibility: "What do you think?" He wanted veterans, and I set about finding the most seriously affected, but quickly realised that we couldn't put them on a stage. But we wanted to go to the limit and looked for veterans who could be present and communicate their story, and where we could have confidence that things wouldn't go wrong. I was lucky, or maybe just skilful, and took people in for an hour or an hour and a half to understand their story and situation. Tue had faith in me and later we brought together a number of people for casting where he was present and we rehearsed a scene. What he did was to create a room with props where they had to walk around and talk. It was quite chaotic and I was freaking out about the situation. When you have PTSD, you're used to a tight schedule, and with Tue it's a bit the opposite. We selected five who seemed to work in the context. Four had PTSD and one was undiagnosed. I had briefed the team on their situation and what triggered them. In addition to Tue, there was an assistant, a set designer and a photographer. Tue didn't quite know how to use video in the performance. What could make them uneasy was especially sudden noises, but also if people they didn't know, came in and walked back and forth. We were quite careful when we started and there was an enormous amount of care and consideration. I had to do the opposite and sat next to Tue. My job was to make the stories more vulnerable and sharper, and I had prepared material for all of them. There was a skeleton: What was their story? When did they break down? What happened afterwards? I played the tough one who asked the uncomfortable and probing questions. I've created profiles of each person before we knew them. It might be interesting to see how they change? There was a week of something resembling group therapy: we checked in and had rounds of how their current state was: What was bothering them? What were they thinking about the situation? We had to get to know them, and they had to understand what Tue wanted to do with the performance. They each had different challenges, and at the same time we had to create a group, even though it could be difficult. But there was also an energy there, so we simply had to find a way to tolerate each other. It's important to make the group work together despite differences. Yes, they are soldiers and I am impressed that they put up with each other. They are disciplined. It's impressive how they support each other. Two by two, they took care of each other and protected each other. Tue also had to cut through and establish that he was the director and when he made a decision, they had to respect it, which they did. Especially in the last phase, he had to emphasise: "I'm the one in charge" even though they might have wanted to continue talking.

How did you deal with the crisis situations? How was the balance between Tue and you?

Sara had a story that concerned her role as a woman. She unfolded it, and it was vulnerable, and it was clear to see when she was under pressure. In the beginning we could let her tell it as she wanted, but when it got to the painful part, it wasn't so clear. After all, they had all told their stories several times to psychologists in the military. Tue was careful not to press, but I thought we needed to know specifically what had happened? What had been done and said. We had to find out how she could tell the story of harassment. She told her story, and Tue took the material home and tightened it up. But there was something she couldn't stand. We had to find a balance so that he got what he needed. We filmed, and Tue wanted close-ups, but that didn't work, and I had to talk it through

with her: How could she say it so it was ok for her and Tue. It was too close with the video camera and we respected that boundary and found another solution. When they were on stage, they often forgot themselves, but with the camera on, you suddenly become very conscious, and Sara couldn't have people's eyes on her and be "exposed" like that. The veterans are very different. Palle could often comment with the best intentions, but it might not be comfortable when you're telling your story. Jonas is incredible in his closedness and had the heroic character that Tue might have had a hard time seeing. The hard part was to get him to in touch with his emotions, and Tue used me for that. Nikolai didn't have much of a filter. For me it was quite dramatic that he said straight out that if his wife wasn't there "I'll die". You can't say that on a theatre stage, but he wanted to. And dramatically it worked well. Nikolai was the first person Tue had spoken to, he was on the verge of being too unwell. We couldn't take responsibility for that, and we were in a tight spot, but we could ask him to talk to his psychiatrist if he got even worse, and that went well. I thought, he's been through a lot of terrible things, but he also had a huge desire to be involved and was a great character with a huge love for the project, which was touching. He had anxiety attacks and chest pains. We had to say: "Can you be here? Are you taking responsibility for the situation yourself?". He was super determined and wanted to do theatre until he collapsed.

There is no doubt that Tue knows how to create a space that is a heavenly space where everything fits and we become a fine unit that swings together. To me, not being familiar with theatre, it looked like amateur theatre in the beginning, but changed later. I didn't see Tue pressured, but sometimes there was pressure from the technical team. During the performance period, I watched the play many times and we took turns to see if anything seemed out of place? If the stage manager noticed a dull mood, we recorded it in the daily reports. During the process, it was mostly Sara who used me but otherwise it was important for me to maintain a certain professional distance. I didn't have a day-to-day role, but when they were touring, we got together for a briefing: What did we need to be aware of? It's been running smoothly, so Tue had to remind us that it shouldn't become routine: there has to be something at stake so that it doesn't become mechanical.

Where are the boundaries of the relationship?

Tue is good at being a director and at not becoming a friend or therapist. That's where he used me. He shouldn't socialise too much, and when the performance needs to be tightened up, he goes into himself and is aware that he is the one who makes the artistic impression. "Now, we don't want any more good ideas", and he is really proper in the way he does it. He maintains the good atmosphere and makes it become a work of art. It's a difficult balance, but we have to be able to go in the opposite direction. There is consideration and respect, but it is okay if it is uncomfortable, otherwise it gets boring.

How did you come out of the programme, how did you debrief?

Now it's over, and there is a void that has to be considered. Tue is present when he works, but he is also an artist and must be able to withdraw and is almost cynical about what the work requires. He has been very fond of the veterans, and it has become a fine piece, but he is also capable of being absent. And move on. We kept talking about the fact that when it was finished, that's how it is. It was a bit brutal with the last performances, where Tue had moved on, and it had become a product

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that was going on tour. He only had one rehearsal day with them, but otherwise they had to lean on the performance manager. I could sense that they felt a little abandoned. I talked to Tue about setting aside a couple of days to talk it through, otherwise they would lose it. We've talked, and I've phoned around, and they've moved in different ways, while the performance managers have taken over. They haven't let go and haven't given up, even though they may have had a hard time now and then. I think that the military therapy has been supplemented by an emotionally focussed process and the fact that they are soldiers means that it comes quite easily to them physically, they adjusted and performed the physical pattern. They have experienced unfolding the pain in a new way, and they have truly taken control of their own story. The relational space has been loving and fun, and that can only make you feel good. Tue has been good at creating the space. Tue balances between the gentle and inclusive leader and a *hard core* leader who is a self-absorbed detached artist. When does he consume people? It's a balance. Art has to be taken seriously and you have to go beyond the social with a kind of cynicism. The audience wants to see the intolerable, and it takes a kind of cynicism to show it.

Interview with Dramaturge Tanja Diers by Erik Exe Christoffersen

Tanja Diers (TD), dramaturge and PhD student at Lund University. Cand.mag. in theatre studies from the University of Copenhagen. Has worked as a dramaturge at Black/White and at FIX&FOXY on productions such as Mod alle odds (Against All Odds), Landet uden drømme (The Land without Dreams) and My Deer Hunter.

When did you start working as a dramaturge for FIX&FOXY?

I have worked with FIX&FOXY all the way back to when I was employed at Teater Sort/Hvid 2011-17. We then developed the collaboration further because Jeppe Kristensen got a job at a university in Norway. That's why Tue needed a sparring partner. It's important to say that my role is very different from Jeppe's, who was more equal to Tue. I am engaged for each individual performance with a specific task. At the same time, you get sucked into FIX&FOXY's work and become part of the artistic universe. It's almost a condition. We have developed a way of working together that changes from performance to performance. The last performance that wasn't FIX&FOXY was *Stille Slag* (Silent Beats) (2021), and it was actually me who initiated the project and engaged Tue as director. The important thing for me as a dramaturge is to make the production team as good as possible.

Is it a kind of partnership?

It's mostly a mutual influence. In the case of *My Deer Hunter*, I was not involved in the close work with the veterans. My job was to be an outsider and to participate in a theatre professional space where Tue and I discussed different possibilities and directions. I didn't have specific tasks, but I sparred with Tue about what dramaturgy the material could sustain, or how best to evoke the veterans' stories. When I joined the work, the veterans had already been selected, and I attended the first workshop. Tue works a lot with setting different improvisations in motion, which creates a lot of material that is written down and at some point, needs to be edited. It's not easy because there is so much and so many possibilities.

So how could all that translate to the stage?

The original idea was to use a kind of backwards dramaturgy, a kind of slow rewind, where we go back to where the actors made the decision to go to war. But it was a bit of a gimmicky idea, and it would force something on the material. I had many ethical considerations about the choice of dramaturgy, which meant that I thought a lot about where the line is between telling a good and truthful version of their experiences and at the same time not pushing the actors into a framework that their hard-earned experiences cannot sustain. I'm quite sensitive to the fact that it has to be their story, and it shouldn't be forced out. I think *Tue* is too. The task is to make their story appear as strong as possible. With the courage of the cast, we owe it to them to be as strong as possible on stage.

*Do you work with the dramaturgy of the film *The Deer Hunter*?*

It was in the picture and in fact there was a lot of material that could be used in parallel with the film. There was a wedding and a funeral, but that wasn't essential for the cast. As Jonas says in the performance, it was only after the homecoming, where the film ends, that things get interesting. For the veterans, it was the homecoming that was important to bring to the fore, and it is a lengthy story that cannot be reduced to a single scene.

We had four parallel stories, and here tragedy and the Aristotelian dramaturgy of conflict escalation, *peripeteia* (turning point), *anagnorisis* (recognition) and *catharsis* (purification) was a possible structure. Precisely because we know Aristotelian dramaturgy so well, especially from Hollywood films, and because it is effective and takes the audience through a satisfying journey that ends with a redemption – *catharsis*, Aristotelian dramaturgy becomes a safety net for the characters in the fragile narratives. This dramaturgy pushes the performance forward and keeps the stories of shame, guilt and suicide in a secure grip.

*Perhaps it is also quite reminiscent of *The Odyssey*, which is about the journey home from war and the difficulty or impossibility of returning home because the home has changed?*

There is clearly that structure too, but we emphasise the recognition and turning points in their stories. Incidentally, *Odysseus* probably also had a form of PTSD with all his adventures and visions on the 20-year journey home, so perhaps it could be seen as internal delusions?

We built the dramaturgy around the individual's story and the inner conflicts as parallel tracks. In this way, they complement each other, and one story draws the other in, like "I recognise that, but perhaps in a slightly different way". It doesn't get muddled but gives a kind of wholeness. They see themselves in each other, and the prerequisite for this to be possible was that the participants had already been through a long therapeutic process. Physically and mentally, they really knew themselves. It's important to emphasise that they shared their knowledge and taught us a lot about what it's like to have PTSD, which we didn't know much about. Each of the actors goes through a different turning point in the performance. One gives up suicide when he looks at the picture of his daughter, another gives up his dream of becoming a special forces soldier.

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The common turning point for all of them is that they have PTSD and have a breakdown, where they each recognise that they need help.

The experience leads to shame, loss of identity, and they rediscover parts of themselves, so to speak, through various forms of therapy, and the four stories are woven together into a whole. One could probably have told each story individually or told one of their stories, but bringing four stories together gives a general sense of tragedy in that they will never be quite the same as they once were. We weren't interested in the obvious conflicts that the audience can work out for themselves between them internally, between Sara and some of the other's men's jokes. That's something that the audience can imagine for themselves, and we focused on each individual's inner conflict.

What role does the space play?

We talked a lot about what a PTSD-dramaturgy with interruptions, elements of danger and being out of control might look like. But it would push the material to repeat trauma and let them portray how they are trapped in a web. The physical stage could be stressful and without safety because the audience is sitting on both sides of the stage and there is nowhere to 'hide'. Fortunately, they could cope with being 'trapped on stage' with the ceiling lowered and with a living room that is made up of several different rooms without a centre. There is not one perspective on stage, not one story, but there are many angles and stories. Hopefully, the multi-perspective scene helps to nuance the overall story of veterans with PTSD. It was an attempt to translate PTSD into space. You could call it the dramaturgy of space.

How many versions of the script did you work with?

It was constantly being rewritten and was an evolving working tool and up to a week before I cut 8-10 pages. It was difficult, because the actors were happy with what they were saying, but it's the dramaturge's job to make it precise, so it's precise for the audience.

It's Tue who adds and subtracts, and I comment. You have to be there every day to be fully familiar with the material, and my job was to be a bit withdrawn and think about what was missing, or what could be left out. I was there about three or four days a week, but not all day. I only watched run-throughs so as not to get too far into it and to be able to maintain a different perspective and see with different eyes as an audience.

There are many voices and movement in the rehearsal room and a lot of suggestions, and that can create a sense of insecurity in the process. Theatre production is often chaotic and the veterans were used to a more hierarchical structure, which we tried to create. It can be different in other processes, but here I gave recommendations to Tue. At the end I had individual conversations with the veterans and could say: "You have to be precise and not say something else, stick to the point. It's important that you say it like that." They tend to change their lines and choose different words without intending to.

Towards the end, we got the dramaturgy in place and their lines were completely settled. They agreed that what they say early on should be included so that the audience understands that the

person they were when they were young, develops during the performance so that by the end they have moved on after returning home.

That was also something that should not be included. Everyone has boundaries that should not be crossed. But something becomes less dangerous by being said, so the boundaries shifted during the rehearsal period. When there were moments when they needed to set boundaries, Sascha helped. That was and is her expertise.

Were there any changes after the premiere?

There were personal changes, but only tiny things. I watched the performance several times along the way, but they stuck to it and said: "Let's go in as if it's the first time" – opening night every night. After all, that's what it is for the audience.

Do you follow the performance?

As much as possible, but not when it went on tour, I was working on another project then. But obviously you get involved both personally and professionally. Fortunately, FIX&FOXY has events where former cast members come to parties where we get together. For the cast, it's often the only performance they're involved in. We had a nice bus trip to Odense for the Reumert award ceremony.

It is the performers who provide the material, and we have to listen, and that requires us to put ourselves into play. We have to be professional listeners. What is the right thing to do? How can we convey that someone makes a decision to commit suicide. We have to discuss it and it's difficult. Gradually you get to know the people involved really well, and that's important. Time is also essential to the process in this type of performance. The right dramaturgy can mean a good performance. Each performer puts a piece of their life on the stage, so it's a big responsibility if we fail. They put their souls in our hands and we have to take that seriously. You never really know how it will be received?

Is there an anthropological dimension to the work?

Yes, there is something about going in and making their field visible and understanding the unexpected or outlandish and the knowledge they have. The anthropological aspect is perhaps that we understand something about being a soldier and returning home with PTSD mainly through the way they tell us about it. It is a kind of knowledge that can have consequences for other PTSD-victims and also for the veterans personally. They take responsibility for a story that is difficult to tell. For the theatre, there is an ethical responsibility for the structure, for the audience and for the performers. They show trust, and we must transform and manage that trust. But it's no use planning it, you can't calculate what's going to happen. Our job is to make art and believe in its power.

Interview with Kasper Bisgaard Laursen by Erik Exe Christoffersen

How was your task as assistant director defined?

I had to transcribe all the stories that they were telling. They had done workshops and interviews beforehand, and we had to work on that. Tue asked questions like: “Do you remember the last situation before being posted”. They were given 10 minutes to write down as specifically as possible what happened. Then they told us, and Tue asked them to act out the episode. For example, Sara says goodbye to her family, they hug? What conversation are they having? Where and how are they standing? Tue then says: “Can you act it out with the help of the others”. There were props that they could use and play with. “Can you use the everyday things we have in different ways to represent something else?”. A cup could be a suitcase, bottles became streams and an apple became a roadside bomb. The coffee and fruit table were on stage, so when there were breaks, we didn’t go somewhere else, we stayed on stage. In fact, the breaks were also used to create little situations where they talked away and used objects.

Was there also a video camera?

Yes, Tue had them filming each other right from the start. There was also a table with a model railway with a village as a central part of the set design. A small village with toy soldiers, it later disappeared and dropped out. In the beginning, my job was to write everything down. I wrote 25 pages a day. We had to include everything, said Tue.

How was it processed? Was it in collaboration with the dramaturge?

We went through it and we wrote comments, also with Sascha, paying attention to what was central. In the first weeks we got through their stories. Tues’ job was to bring the stories out. In practical terms, considerations were made and there was care. From 10 to 12 noon, they were one-on-one with Tue and Sascha, where we asked about the personal relationship with family. This created a safe space so that they could share it in a larger forum afterwards. They didn’t know each other and needed each other’s support. It was clear that you could say stop, there were breaks, and they didn’t feel the pressure that often arises in the theatre process, where you have to get to a performance. They have to find their pace and have breaks and a suitably slow way of working. There were days when they had to say they couldn’t go on. They were not used to being on stage. There were situations where stories had to be prepared, for example Sara’s story, and there were discussions about whether it should be included at all. But she worked out a version in collaboration with the psychologist, and it was important that she could decide for herself what to include. In the end, when everything was cut down to the bone, we reflected on the fact that the nuances disappeared. Tue had to explain that what we are doing has a perspective that cannot encompass everything. It took time to convince them.

How was the relationship between the dramaturge, Sascha and Tue?

In the beginning, Sascha was present all the time, new stories were brought to the table, and she was almost a co-director. And Tanja was more of an observer in the background. As we got closer

to the premiere, and the material was fixed, Sascha was more in the background. Tanja and Tue made cuts in relation to the fact that it was a performance about PTSD and not a war. Tanja went through the monologues with the veterans so that they could phrase their text in the right way and ensure what information should be included. At the rehearsals with invited spectators, they ask questions about whether the spectators understood the technicalities of the sequences and the acts of war, whether anything was too much.

What about the video part?

I wrote down at the rehearsals. Camera 1 films like this and like that, it became stage directions. The camera angles were written down during the rehearsals and established where they should zoom or be close up.

How do they remember that? The stage work is much more important than the actual images?

The first performances had some uncertainty and were hell to get organised. But we were sure of the form, which they had to familiarise themselves with in terms of camera cables and tripods. They are given a function and they are concentrated. They took it a bit like a parallel to a military exercise. They saw a parallel between theatre and military. It's hard and you have to follow orders with discipline and the production team is hierarchised. Palle said: "We are family and stationed". "No", Tue had to say, "We do theatre, we are not comrades in arms", there is a professional distance.

The process has different phases. There is the generation of materials, and there is the establishing and demarkation of the work. We started in the rehearsal hall, where we had objects in the practice room. Later we moved onto the stage with the audience seating, and the spatial shift confirmed that this was going to be a performance to be shown to an audience. That material needs to be shaped. We stopped interviewing the individuals from 10am, so it became rehearsals from 10am to 4pm. In the autumn it was straight to work. We had quite a short time. There was a set design, there was a script, and we started with run-throughs. My function was to focus on the camera and where they were in the room, how was the image, where were they sitting, who was shooting?

What is the balance between the repetition of the theatre and their PTSD?

They are relatively far along in the treatment of their PTSD, so they were comfortable with the situation. They have told their story before, but in the rehearsal process, repetition becomes difficult. When the audience came in, it became a new form. It stirred something up. Sascha was there to maintain some control over the risk factor: "Do you need a break?" she could ask, and she could take over Tue's role and talk to the veterans if it was a strenuous day. She followed up on each day and helped managing, but Tue himself was aware of the limits. She managed the check-in and check-out, because there had to be time for that, and then we had to stop a little earlier. This became crucial for the artistic aspect, and it wouldn't have worked without her. They went for walks together and talked about how to approach the stories. She went to the veterans as well as to Tue and was in a position to ask direct questions. Sasha helped to define the boundaries between the social and artistic spaces. It was important to delineate and guide the social space. It was important to keep the focus on the problem itself.

My Deer Hunter

How could they balance between repetitions while keeping it alive, so that it doesn't become routine?

Tue wanted them to talk and listen to each other and in that way be present. The camera forces them to look and listen. I can perhaps sense that they have lost a bit of nerve. It's as if they're playing it faster, but it's hard to pinpoint what it is. Of course, they get a routine, and as Tue said, they should remember that there's something at stake also for the audience. To step onto the stage is an active choice?

What have you learnt?

The form, the way Tue collects materials, creates questions and structures rehearsals. The project succeeds because Tue is generous and empathetic. He gives something of himself. The veterans didn't know him, and they also asked him to talk about himself. Tue is a person in theatre with a fairly high status, but he hadn't told them that. But he would like to share his theatre life. At the same time, he had a certain reservation: it wasn't about him. It was their role to talk about themselves, and they were not on an equal footing. When we did check-in, Palle suggested that we should all check in, but Tue made it clear that it wasn't our role. It's always a question of what and how much to give.

Aftermath

Two years have passed since the veterans first entered the Betty Nansen Teatret for a workshop. There were 38 performances at Edison and then the performance went on tour to TEATER V, Teater Nordkraft, Aalborg, Teater Katapult, Aarhus and Teater Momentum, Odense.

The performance received a Reumert award for performance of the year, and the four veterans received medals of merit from Danmarks Veteraner (Denmark's Veterans).

Performance of the Year 2021: My Deer Hunter, FIX&FOXY and Betty Nansen Teatret.

The jury's motivation: *"The traumas emerged like snipers in the eternal field kitchen of four PTSD-stricken military veterans. In their frayed nerves, the sound of a smashed plate became a shell impact. Here, the stench of burnt flesh and the sight of the soldiers' suicidal looks brought reality onto the stage, making us shudder at the encounter with the living dead. Grim and unsettling theatre."* (<https://www.aaretsreumert.dk/pris/aarets-forestilling-21>)

Jonas' acceptance speech for the Reumert Prize:

"I have thought a lot about right and wrong wars over the past 11 years, since I took part in one of the wrong ones in 2010. A war that must be considered lost. The best thing that has come out of it, is that a year ago I had the opportunity to take part in one of the right ones. With the three toughest soldiers I know, I went to war – not in a desert far from Denmark, but on a theatre set – to challenge the perception of wounded veterans. And we won. I wish that everyone who fights can see that the battle can be won!"

Thank you to Tue Biering and FIX&FOXY, Betty Nansen Teatret and all the other good people who have beautifully reinforced our story. We have taken 1000 tears and turned them into a Reumert.”



Tue Biering, Trine Bramsen og veteranerne

Sara's acceptance speech:

Thank you to all the people who spend an hour and a half of their lives watching the performance, and in that hour and a half join us on our deer hunt. From childhood, to joining the Armed Forces, to each of our missions around the world and back home again. Where each of our missions to come home from war started, up to today's conditions and premises. This is a great recognition. It confirms to me that the story of Denmark's stationed personnel is important to tell. (sings)

“Lo, the sun ascends from;ant on life's bright shore.”

It took courage to go to war; it also took courage to stand on stage and tell my story. But! If I want people to understand, then I must also tell the story – and what an honour it has been, night after night, to stand on stage and tell my story together with the three toughest warriors and with the wildest safety net of beautiful people under us.

My Deer Hunter

Thank you for listening. Thank you for the recognition. Thank you to the Danish stationed personnel. Men and women who have been, and are right now, out in the world making an effort for Denmark. Thank you to dear relatives. Thank you to those we miss. This Reumert is also your Reumert.

A journey is not defined by time or place. A journey can take place in a few days, in familiar surroundings. And that's what this reunion feels like, a journey. I have already been in the valley and on the mountain top, in the desert and on the stage. I have already been in excitement, nervousness, the state of being overwhelmed, joy and sorrow. This hunt, has taken me on many trips in and out of myself.

It takes courage. It takes self-esteem. It takes trust in the loss of control.

A journey is not defined by time or place. A journey can take place in a few days, in familiar surroundings. The journey continues.

“Award of the Danish Veterans’ Medal of Merit”

Denmark’s Veterans have awarded the four veterans who with great success convey their experiences and emotions through a communication channel we have not used before – the theatre. On 8th of September at Teater V in Valby, our chairman Niels Hartvig Andersen and Preben Korreborg presented the Denmark’s Veterans’ Medal of Merit to Sara la Cour, Jonas Hjort Andersen, Nicolai Stokholm Sondrup-Otsen and Palle Würtz”.

The last performance of the autumn tour was at Teater Momentum, where Minister for Defence Trine Bramsen and the Mayor of Odense Peter Rahbæk Juel were among the audience. After the performance, they both had a good talk with the veterans, which ended with an invitation to lunch with Trine Bramsen to continue the conversation.

MY DEER HUNTER

Cast: Jonas Hjorth Andersen, Nicolai Stokholm Sondrup-Otsen, Palle Würtz and Sara la Cour

Director: Tue Biering. Scenographer Ida Grarup. Lighting and video design Andreas Buhl.

Sound design: Daniel Fogh

Dramaturge: Tanja Diers. Cast consultant: Sascha Kempinski. Assistant director: Kasper Bisgaard Laursen

Erik Exe Christoffersen, Associate Professor at the School of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy. Aarhus University.

Ida Krøgholt, Associate Professor at the School of Communication and Culture – Dramaturgy, Aarhus University.

Kathrine Winkelhorn has for a number of years been responsible for the master’s programme in Culture and Media Production at Malmö University and is chair of Copenhagen International Theatre.



My Deer Hunter. Photo: Søren Meisner