

THEATRE OF WAR

A FILM BY LOLA ARIAS



Alojamiento PM

THEATRE OF WAR is an essay on how to represent war, performed by former enemies. British and Argentinian veterans of the Falklands/Malvinas war come together to discuss, rehearse and re-enact their memories 35 years after the conflict.



1.

SYNOPSIS

In 1982, Argentina and UK fought the Malvinas Falklands War. The war ended with the British military victory and took about 1.000 lives, both British and Argentinean. While the conflict took place years ago, the sovereignty of the islands is still in dispute.

THEATRE OF WAR tells the story of how six veterans from the Malvinas/ Falklands War came together to make a film. Almost thirty-five years after the conflict, three British and three Argentine veterans spent months together discussing their war memories and then rehearsing their re-enactment.

This film is a way of showing the whole social experiment of making an artistic project with one-time enemies of war: the auditions to find the protagonists, the first meetings and discussions with them, the theatrical re-enactments of their memories in different scenarios: a swimming pool, a construction site, a military regiment. All the scenes in the film are at the same time authentic and artificial. Sometimes it looks like it's happening for the first time, sometimes it's a highly rehearsed situation.

The film playfully switches between reality and fiction, spontaneity and acting. It explores how to transform a soldier into an actor, how to turn war experiences into a story, how to show the collateral effects of war. The movie brings together former enemies to perform their wartime and post-war nightmares.

2.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

THEATRE OF WAR is my first feature film. Since 2001 I have written and directed a number of theatre and visual arts projects. My work explores the line between fiction and reality. In 2013, the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) invited me to participate in an event called "After a War" in which artists from around the world were to develop projects on the consequences of armed conflicts. I thought it would be interesting to work on the effects the Falklands/Malvinas war had on its veterans and on society at large. The result was a video installation made up of five short films in which each of the veterans performs his most unforgettable war experience in a space he regularly uses in the present day: a psychologist re-enacts a bomb explosion at the psychiatric hospital where he works, a champion triathlete re-enacts the death of his comrade in the swimming pool where he trains every day, and so on. They perform their own flashbacks with the participation of the people who are part of their lives today.

This first work gave me the chance to work with Argentine veterans on how to tell and perform their own war experiences. I started to wonder what stories British veterans might have, and what would happen if I brought together veterans from both countries to work together over a

long period of time. I decided to make a play and a feature film in which I could include all the Argentine and British stories in one narration. I wanted them to perform their war memories together and to reflect on the long-term consequences of war in their lives.

These men went to war when they were eighteen to twenty years old and now they are fifty-something. With the events now thirty-five years behind them, you can see what the war did to them. When they came back from the islands, the Argentine military dictatorship forced the young conscripts to sign an affidavit stating that they would not speak about their war experiences. And society didn't want to hear from them either. They were the losers. When I started to meet British veterans, I realized that although they were a bit older and better-trained, they too bore with them big secrets and a lot of pain. After all these years, they had not had the chance to speak up and reflect on what they had been through. And once Thatcher's victory celebrations had finished, they felt neglected by their own society.

In 2015, I held separate interviews and workshops in London and Buenos Aires with veterans from each side. When I asked them if they wanted



to meet their former rivals, they were reluctant and curious at the same time. Finally, I selected six performers, three from each side, and we spent several months in Buenos Aires getting to know each other, rehearsing and filming their memories, while visiting a school, a psychological support centre for veterans, a military regiment. The play *Minefield* opened in June 2016 at the Royal Court Theatre in London. And we continued filming. I wanted to make a film that wasn't just a behind-the-scenes film, but another way of dealing with the same subject.

The film is an attempt to show the whole social experiment of making an artistic project with former enemies of war: the interviews and auditions to find the protagonists, the first meetings and discussions between them; theatrical re-enactments of their memories in different scenarios (a swimming pool, a construction site, a military regiment); and scenes with them being confronted by different people: school children, psychologists, young actors. All these scenes in the film are at the same time authentic and artificial. Sometimes it looks like it's happening for the first time, sometimes it's a highly rehearsed situation. The film plays with the boundaries between reality and fiction, spontaneity and acting. It shows the veterans becoming the subjects of their own stories, the actors of their own script, and not just the creatures behind the lens.

For two years now we have rehearsed and discussed war stories. We have argued about politics, art and everything else. We have danced together, had dinners, public talks and memorial visits together, and we are still touring the world with the play. Throughout the film you can witness a strong bond forming between former enemies, and with the artistic team. *THEATRE OF WAR* documents the creation of a utopian community.



3.

INTERVIEW WITH LOLA ARIAS

THEATRE OF WAR is one stage in what has been a multimedia project for you. From a video installation Veterans where we see five Argentine veterans in spaces of their everyday world to the stage production Minefield/Campo Minado, where you bring six veterans from Argentina and the UK together to rethink the conflict and how it is remembered. And now the third part of the journey, a film THEATRE OF WAR where you return to those six veterans in a different context.

The whole project started in 2013 when I was asked by the London International Festival of Theatre to create something for an exhibition called 'After the War' in which artists from across the world were invited to reflect on the consequences of war. I decided to work with Argentine veterans doing re-enactments of their war memories in the places where they work or live.

I then had the idea to bring together veterans from both sides, to see how the winning side reflected on the war and what traces the conflict had left on their lives. Interviewing veterans in London, I decided to make both a piece of theatre and a film but I didn't want one project to be the main assignment with the second operating as a form of documentation. I want-

ed them each to present two different artistic approaches to the same subject. We spent several months rehearsing in London and while we were preparing the theatrical production we were also filming. In the film, you see the auditions of both the Argentine and British veterans; you see their first encounters, how they talk to each other, and try on costumes for the first time. You see how they start to perform and how they end up re-enacting their memories in different scenarios. In THEATRE OF WAR, you never know exactly whether the situation that you see is happening for the first time or if it has been rehearsed many times. The film presents this oscillation between reality and fiction, authenticity and artificiality, and performing and being.

You make some very particular choices regarding the placement of the camera. At the beginning the camera is still and the first scene is captured as if it is taking place within a proscenium frame.

At the beginning of the film the veterans are looking at the camera, auditioning and talking to the camera. In the second part of the film the camera is like a witness to their encounters. In the third part of the film the camera plays a different role; it goes from theatre to

film inside the film itself. It frames scenes in a more cinematographic way and the veterans perform for the camera differently. There's the reality of the places where the men are filmed which are a bit like a stage but at the same time the camera creates a fiction with them.

You bring actors into the film who are doubles for the veterans and they aid this process of engaging with the past; they play a role in creating this fiction you've just spoken about.

In the last part of the film these doubles appear, figures that represent what these men lost: their innocence and their youth. They were eighteen year old kids coming out to the world and were marked by the experience of war for the rest of their lives. The doubles are both a representation of who they were and also the next generation asking questions about what war was like, why they fought, and who they were at that time. This encounter between themselves today and their former youth is a way into the fiction. These men move from being the protagonists to being the spectators of their own lives.

It's a beautiful moment in the film as these men who have lived this war so obsessively for so long, let go and let others perform their roles.

When the veterans sat on the other side and saw themselves as young men, they were completely moved by the scene, seeing their own past being performed, and realising that it is now the responsibility of a new generation to perform, discuss, and tell these stories.

You feature a number of objects in the film that facilitate this re-enactment of the past -Sukrim's kukri knife, toy soldiers used to re-enact the battle of Wireless Ridge, Marcelo's original uniform...

These objects are documents of the war. They have a whole history behind them and I like the fact that the men are exploring these objects and sharing the stories that relate to these objects together. The fact that they kept them after 35 years explains their importance. Showing these objects to their former enemies is an excuse to go back to them. Marcelo displays the magazines his father had kept to Lou. Suddenly, it makes sense to go back to these images because with the distance of time and looking at them together both Marcelo and Lou come to a different understanding of what happened. It's not only pain that comes from the images, there's a bond created between these two men which has proved transcendent for each of them; they are both alive and able to tell their stories.

They may not share the same language but there is an empathy between them – and here the film differs from the theatrical piece because Lou and Marcelo effectively become the film’s main characters. They both share this common wound that they are not even able to speak about. Lou and Marcelo first talk to each other, then they speak to the children in the school, then the psychologists at the centre, and finally to the younger generation of actors who are going to perform their roles. They reflect on a series of issues: how do speak about what we experienced? Is it possible to share it? Is it possible to take an experience out of ourselves? Is it possible to learn something from this sharing? Is it possible to learn something more if we perform it?

The film also raises the possibility that there are things that can’t be shared...

Towards the end as Lou talks about the image of the dead soldier that haunts him, there is a make-up artist creating an image of his nightmares, I think that this is something very disturbing because this image will never go away, it will stay with him for ever. And this becomes a very strong feeling at the end of the film.

This is very much a film about communication. Marcelo and Lou try and find a way of speaking to each other through these two very polarised approaches to the conflict and they do this through Spanglish which is neither English nor Spanish. They invent their own language as a way of speaking to each other. It’s a lovely way of presenting the need to move away from binary positions. And the film asks profound question about how to present a story from contested positions.

It’s difficult to hear the story of the other and the film asks what it means to be inside the

story of the other. They don’t just tell their own stories, these men give their bodies to tell the story of the other. They perform in the other’s past and somehow through that process they become part of it.

Tell me about your use of footage.

We used very little historical footage. We had a lot of material but we decided to use select images that had a very special value for these men. We showed footage of the SS Canberra returning home because this is familiar footage. It’s a stereotypical image in some way of the victorious soldier coming home to family and friends. I juxtapose this with the veterans’ song ‘Have you ever been to war?’ which exposes their inner feelings on coming home. Significant here is the absence of footage of the Argentine soldiers returning home. When the Argentines came back they were hidden from the public. The authorities didn’t want to show the defeated, emaciated soldiers. The spectator has to imagine the return of the defeated soldiers through the story that is read by Marcelo from his diaries. Marcelo reads out the fact that civilian clothes are given to the returning soldiers in a plastic bag. I love this sentence. The men are given their previous lives in a plastic bag and sent home. How do you these men deal with this? How do they deal with the families waiting for loved ones who have died? No official is coming to speak to the families about what happened to their children. It’s not fair that the responsibility falls on these soldiers and they can’t deal with it; so they say that these men are following on another bus.

We also used footage shot by Marcelo when he returned to the islands showing the different places he returns to in his stories. There’s a moment in the film when he talks about how,

when he was in the hospital, he painted Mount William because he was afraid the medication would erase his memory. This embodies the conflict between letting go of his past and grabbing the past very hard to ensure the memory doesn’t go away. He wants it to be less painful but doesn’t want it to disappear.

Much of the film takes place in a neutral space.

The men meet in this white box which is a neutral space, a third space representing this nowhere land of the Falklands/Malvinas which they are always talking about and also the nowhere land of memory.

I would classify this as a creative documentary and you have classified your own stage practice as documentary theatre...

This film is the result of 10 years of working with people on the telling of their stories – what I call documentary theatre. We work for four or five months together every day on the creation of the text – they are the writers, the performers, and the directors who bring the ideas of how to perform their own stories to the stage. They play a very important role in the creative process and you can see this process in the film. They are producing their own material; they are performing themselves as actors; they are in control of what they are doing and that is different to classic documentary cinema which is based on the idea that the protagonists are just ‘being’ rather than ‘performing’.

The film asks questions of the documentary format. I’m reminded of the moment where David talks of not being an actor and yet, of course, he is an actor.

David says ‘I’m not a fucking actor. I don’t

know what an actor does’ but he’s performing at that very moment. It shows how these veterans complain about the film but at the same time they are performing their complaints. There’s another comment on documentary cinema when Lou is reflecting on the footage of himself recorded for a TV documentary on the Falklands/Malvinas when he was 24. He was shown crying as he recalled a particular incident and this has marked his life since. He reflects on how people see him crying on a YouTube clip and reduce him to this single act. Because of this, he was too ashamed to attend veteran reunions. This episode has marked him. THEATRE OF WAR asks about the responsibility of the artist in presenting the lives of others. How do you present the subjects you are working with?

So much of the film is about encounters. Identity as a form of negotiation that the film articulates. How do you present the stories of others?

I was a young girl when the Falklands/Malvinas War broke out. There’s a scene in the school where David is talking to a young girl who asks him as series of questions. It is as if I am that girl asking those questions. What is your favourite colour? What were you afraid of during the war? I was the person asking both naïve and difficult questions one after the other. The fact that she doesn’t quite know how to react reflects the impossibility of imagining or feeling what the other has experienced.

And the responsibility of staging that experience.

Yes, the responsibility of performing and staging that experience. This is central part of THEATRE OF WAR.





4.

LOLA ARIAS

Lola Arias (Buenos Aires, 1976) is a writer, theatre director, visual artist and performer. She collaborates with people from different backgrounds (war veterans, former communists, Bulgarian children, etc) in theatre, literature, music, film and art projects. Her productions play with the overlap zones between reality and fiction. She staged, among others, *My life after*, *Familienbande*, *The year I was born*, *Melancholy and demonstration*, *The art of making money*, *The art of arriving*, *Minefield* and *Atlas of Communism*. She does films and art installations. She also created several urban intervention projects with Stefan Kaegi. Together with Ulises Conti, she composes and plays music. She published poetry, fiction and plays. Lola Arias' works have been shown at festivals including Lift Festival, Theater Spektakel; Under the radar NY; Wiener Festwochen; Spielart Festival; Sterischer Herbst; and in venues like Theatre de la Ville, Red Cat LA, Walker Art Centre, Parque de la memoria, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

www.lolaarias.com



5.

CAST & CREW

Produced by
Gema Films

Coproduced by
BWP
Sutor Kolonko
Sake Argentina
SWR-ARTE

-

With
Lou Armour
David Jackson
Rubén Otero
Sukrim Rai
Gabriel Sagastume
Marcelo Vallejo

DoP and Camera
Manuel Abramovich

Project Doctor
Alan Pauls

Editing
Anita Remón
Alejo Hoiyman

Sound Design
Sofía Straface (ASA)

Mix
Sebastián González (ASA)

Line Producers
Carla Rosmino,
Francisco Novick

Research
Luz Algranti
Sofía Medici

Artistic Assistance
Lucila Piffer

CoProduced by
Bettina Walter
Ingmar Trost
Pedro Saleh

Produced by
Gema Juárez Allen
Alejandra Grinschpun

Written and directed by
Lola Arias



THEATRE OF WAR

CONTACT

Gema Films

San Luis 3122

Buenos Aires, Argentina

e. info@gemafilms.com

t. +54 911 4163 4724

w. <http://gemafilms.com>

