

Autofictions of Postwar: Fostering Empathy in Lola Arias'

Minefield/Campo minado (2016)

It has often been claimed that the 1982 Malvinas/Falkland war was an event without testimonies or images. In her prologue to Juan Travnik's powerful photographic portraits of Argentine veterans and island landscapes, taken between 1994 and 2008, Graciela Speranza writes, for example, that except for those who were in front of the British troops on the battlefields, "Malvinas es una guerra sin imágenes ni relatos" (no numerated pages). For Speranza, the only things Argentine people remember of the war are nationalist fervour and a few laconic official reports accompanied by military marches. In the same vein, Julieta Vitullo, author of a book about Argentine literary fictions of the war, writes that "era poco lo que la sociedad sabía –o quería saber– acerca de los acontecimientos mismos" (13).

However, Martín Kohan has noted that already in 1982 the book *Los chicos de la guerra*, by Daniel Kon (also made into a film by Bebe Kamin in 1984), offered a number of testimonies of Argentine soldiers who narrated their experiences in the South Atlantic archipelago. The volume proves that, unlike the soldiers of World War I who, as Walter Benjamin put it in 1933, returned speechless from the battlefields, Argentine soldiers had a lot to say in the aftermath of the conflict. Kohan adds: "Tampoco puede decirse que no hubiese interés en atender estos relatos; el libro agotó varias ediciones en pocos meses" (2014a, 269). Furthermore, popular magazines such as *Gente* and *Somos* published a large number of images of the war that not only illustrated reports but also furnished the lies that formed part of the discourses of the 1976-1983 military dictatorship. Nevertheless, more than the real testimonies and images of the war, what has perhaps caught the attention of those studying the conflict

in the postwar period are the fictions that surrounded –and continue to surround– the event, “the representations more than the realities,” the “characters more than the protagonists” (McGuirk 14), the rumours more than the recollections.

Due to their distant location, their semi-deserted and inhospitable landscape, and their mysterious shape (for writer Carlos Gamerro they look like the stains on the cards of the famous Rorschach physiological test),¹ the Malvinas/Falklands islands continue to function as a powerful trigger for the imagination and a site around which Argentines’ deepest fears, obsessions, and desires often circulate. They are, in that sense, a blank canvas that can be filled with any imaginary narrative (Vitullo 185).

Though some filmmakers, including Tristan Bauer (*Iluminados por el fuego*, 2005) and Julio Cardoso (*Locos de la bandera*, 2012), have chosen to deliver heroic or historical reconstructions of the conflict, the diverse fictions that surrounded the war have also resulted in an equally sizeable corpus of more playful and profane narratives, notably by writers such as Fogwill, Gamerro, or Patricio Pron and filmmakers like José Luis Marqués (*Fuckland*, 2000).

Minefield (or *Campo minado*, as it was subsequently called in its Buenos Aires release), Lola Arias’ 2016 performance in which Argentine and British veterans re-enact their experiences on the battlefield, is characterized by a ludic style that deploys fact and fiction to draw on both of these satiric and epic trends.² The testimonies of the Argentine performers exercise a sort of “epic of failure” (Kohan, *El país de la guerra*, 268), while, at the same time, there is something of a “failure of the epic” in the British narratives of triumph. Nothing is completely black or white in *Minefield*, and this, I want to suggest, is one of its main achievements. Arias narrates the war in a performance that challenges all the dichotomies often present in previous accounts of the conflict –victims/perpetrators, allies/enemies, heroes/villains, spectators/actors,

subjective memory/historical memory— and delivers a play that avoids both Manichean readings of that painful history and also dangerous discourses on forgetting and reconciliation, fostering instead empathic collaborations between the performers and the audience.

Old Wounds, New Alliances

The unprecedented cooperation on stage between former enemies as a means of delivering a more comprehensive memory of the war, and the status of the play as what I call here an “autofiction of the postwar,”³ produce a shift in relation to previous cultural representations of the conflict in Argentina, including canonical texts such as Fogwill’s *Los pichiciegos* (1983) and popular films such as *Illuminados por el fuego*, both based on real events but which are more accurately described as “fictions [rather than autofictions] of war.” Conversely *Minefield* is not so much a narrative about the war but a narrative about the *postwar*. Arias said in this respect that: “No me interesa la guerra, *me interesa la posguerra*. Me importa qué le pasa a una persona que pasó por esa experiencia. Me importa qué hizo la memoria, qué borró, qué transformó” (Cruz, my emphasis). Strictly speaking, however, *Minefield* shows the impossibility of, once again, drawing a clear line between two categories often thought in opposition (the war and the postwar) and presents them rather as a continuum of temporalities and experiences, or better, in juxtaposition, as anachronistic montages of times, to put it in Georges Didi-Huberman’s terms.⁴

In the play the performers return to the islands through their memories and in footage of trips made after the war and shown to the audience on a big screen displayed on stage. There is a moment, for example, when Marcelo Vallejo, one of the Argentine veterans, shows footage of a 2009 trip that he made to the archipelago

and the remnants that he found there, including parts of the tent that he used during the war. The rest of the performers recall their time on Malvinas as if theatre were a time machine, a concept present in many of Arias' productions. "This play," says the director in an interview with *The Guardian*, "is like a time machine. We see these men as they are now in their 50s and we also catch a glimpse of their younger selves, those young men in their late teens and early 20s who went to war" (Gardner).

Furthermore, the idea of return (not just *to* the islands but also *of* the islands to their legitimate owners) is also implied in the name of The Beatles' song that the performers sing on stage ("Get Back"), which was also the inspiration for the name of a tribute band, the Get Back Trio, led by one of the Argentine veterans. And yet it is very clear at the end of the show that on many levels the ex combatants never actually left the islands; or better that the islands -and what happened there- never left *them*.

Arias' focus on an event of the past that is still an open wound for the performers and her use of real-life accounts presented in fictional frameworks raises new questions regarding the ethical and aesthetic implications of representing the war in art and literature: is it possible to keep talking about the "fictions of the war," not to mention joking about the conflict, when there are real veterans on stage? Can, and should, theatre become a site of mourning and catharsis for vulnerable and traumatized subjects?

I will explore here Arias' conception of theatre as a "living creature" and "social experiment" with a high degree of unpredictability, as she described the play in a lecture that she gave on 6 June 2016, at King's College, London. The experimental gathering of performers who fought against each other and who considered themselves foes during the war poses a series of potential problems regarding semi-autobiographical performances of trauma. These include, for example,

the risks of re-victimizing those who went through painful experiences and of feeding the morbid gaze that often characterizes audiences of what Leigh Gilmore has called performances of “limit-cases.”⁵

I will argue, however, that Arias not only successfully overcomes these risks with the aid of playful and distancing devices, but also demonstrates how theatre can become an *affective space of empowerment and enunciation* in which the marginal and vulnerable subject can “talk out, talk back, talk otherwise” (and) “literally take centre stage” (Heddon 55) gaining visibility and producing an empathic connection with the viewers.

As explained by Alison Landsberg, “the experience of empathy has more potential and is more politically useful and progressive than its cousin sympathy” (149). While sympathy is a feeling of simple identification with the vulnerable subject that reinforces victimhood and makes us look down on them, the experience of empathy (a word that appeared in the English dictionary only relatively recently, in 1904) “is not purely emotional but also contains a cognitive component” (149). Similarly, for Jill Bennett, empathy is the “most appropriate form of engagement with trauma imagery” (8). Following Dominic LaCapra, she suggests that to empathize with the victim is to *feel for* another while “becoming aware of a distinction between one’s own perception and the experience of the other” (8). The experience of empathy is thus in opposition to other common reactions to trauma art such as overidentification, mimesis or appropriation. Certain aesthetic experiences, she argues, foster empathy by creating what Deleuze has called an affective encounter with a sign, a sign that is felt rather than recognized, and that triggers thought and critical inquiry; “a sign that touches, but does not necessarily communicate the ‘secret’ of personal experience” (6). With its Brechtian distancing devices, *Minefield*

nurtures empathy in two directions: the Argentinians and the British create an empathic bond with each other and we, the audience, empathize with the experiences of the performers on stage.

While empathy encourages understanding it does not foster, and in fact rejects, any idea of reconciliation or forgetting. In other words, and as pointed out by Argentine writer Mariana Enríquez in a radio review, *Minefield* “propone pensar el conflicto en conflicto.” In the play, the war, and more specifically the issue of the sovereignty of the islands, is left unresolved. At the same time, however, *Minefield* invites us to embrace the possibility that Argentinian and British people can live together, even in disagreement.

And if the play is successful in proposing this co-existence of former enemies it is because, as we will see in the forthcoming sections, it avoids any stereotypical images of the soldiers. Theatre, in Arias’ work, embodies an opportunity to de-naturalize the collective terms that for years have been used to describe a very heterogeneous group of people from both sides of the South Atlantic war, such as “chicos de la guerra,” “locos de la bandera,” “piratas,” and “heroes of Malvinas”. Autobiographical theatre is indeed a privileged space for representing a more complex and layered subject, since “in the act of representing the self, there is always more than one self to contend with; the self is unavoidably split. There is a self who was and the self who is. There is the self who is performed, and the performing self” (Heddon 28). In *Minefield* the spectator is thus confronted with “veterans” who are difficult to categorize and a “split subject,” a self that is at the same both truthful and fictional, a persona and a character.

Performing Malvinas

Characterized by the merging of film, acting, testimonies and documentary theatre, the creative use of technology, thunderous rock and punk music, *Minefield* was staged for the first time in May and June 2016 at the Brighton Theatre Festival and at London's Royal Court Theatre in the framework of the LIFT festival. It puts on stage three former Argentine soldiers (Marcelo Vallejo, member of a mortar team and now a triathlon champion; Rubén Otero, survivor of the sinking of the ARA General Belgrano and now a member of a Beatles tribute band; and Gabriel Sagastume, an average soldier and now a criminal attorney); two British soldiers (Lou Armour, a former prisoner of the Argentines and now a special needs teacher, and David Jackson, who worked in intelligence during the war and who is now a psychologist), and Sukrim Rai, a Nepalese-Ghurka who only recently acquired British citizenship and who currently works as a security guard.

The six performers reenact different episodes of the war on stage and in chronological order: the reasons that led them to join the army, whether they killed someone or witnessed the deaths of their fellow soldiers, how they were received when they returned home, and what they do now, more than thirty years after the war. With this play Arias explores topics that have defined most of her *oeuvre*: theatre as a medium to revive the past and recover lost or blocked memories; the idea of a dynamic and changing performance in which life feeds theatre and theatre has concrete effects on the lives of the performers; and the use of autofiction and playful devices.

The play has its origins in a video-installation, *Veterans* (2014), that Arias made as a contribution to a project entitled *After the War*, for which twenty-five artists from all over the world were invited to London to create a piece on the consequences of war.⁶ *Veterans* is, at the moment of writing, also being exhibited in

the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires, as part of Arias' exhibition *Doble de Riesgo*, and will be soon released as a documentary film. For *Minefield* the director kept the concept of that initial project (the idea that the performers were going to reenact their experiences) and one of the performers (Vallejo). In addition, Arias auditioned sixty more former soldiers from each side before choosing the remaining five veterans. She worked in both countries separately and saw the full cast for the first time in Buenos Aires: "I was terrified of what was going to happen, but they ended up becoming a group of performers sharing their memories and helping each other in the scenes." This experience, Arias believes, "created a bond between them that was even stronger than the one created by war" (lecture at King's), not least because, as one of the performers puts it at the beginning of the play, the rehearsals spanned a longer period than the war itself (which was over after only seventy-four days).

Arias is not the first to address the war in the South Atlantic on stage. A handful of British playwrights have focused on the war for their productions, mainly in plays released during the immediate aftermath of the conflict and as a means of exploring issues of class struggle under Margaret Thatcher. Steven Berkoff's *Sink the Belgrano*, for example, released in 1986 at the Half Moon Theatre in London, addresses Thatcher's role in the war (humorously named Maggot Scratcher), and the actions of her Foreign Minister, Francis Pym (Pimp in the play) as well as her Minister of Defence, John Nott (Nit). According to scholar Tonny Dunn, "Berkoff's 90 minute piece indicts the chauvinism of the British working class, reduces the War Cabinet to a comic threesome of Maggot, Pimp, and Nit, and choreographs the drilling and disciplining of a submarine crew" (cited by Green). In her study on Falklands War plays in British drama, Melissa Green also mentions *Arrivederci*

Millwall (1985, directed by Nick Perry) and *Restoration* (directed by Edward Bond, first released in 1981 and rereleased in 1988 with the inclusion of subtle references to the war).⁷ In 1998, Guy Masterson released *A Soldier's Song* in Edinburgh, a play based on a testimonial book by a British soldier and his memories of the front line. And in 2002, on the twentieth anniversary of the war, Jennifer Lunn directed a new version of *Falkland Sound*, based on the letters and poems that twenty-five-year-old Lieutenant David Tinker, killed in action, wrote to his wife from the battlefield. According to the official website of the production, "*Falkland Sound* presents one of the only views of the Falklands War written as the battle was raging." The play, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, first opened at the Royal Court Theatre (where *Minefield* was shown in 2016) in June 1983.

By contrast to the relatively small number of plays released recently in Britain, in Argentina there have recently been a growing number of productions focused on the Malvinas/Falklands war. In their book *Presencia del "inglés" en el teatro y el cine argentinos: de los orígenes a Malvinas* (2011), Victoria Cox and Nora Glickman identify a number of plays on the subject, notably *Del sol naciente* (Gambaro, 1983) and *Las Malvinas* (Guglieminio, 1995). The first was written during the dictatorship and released just after the return to democracy and explores the effects of the war on the mothers of the soldiers. *Las Malvinas* is about an Argentine father who studied at Eton and who rejects his Creole origins, a son who is a true nationalist and volunteers to fight in the war, and a mother who fears that her son has become a "populista, subversivo y cabecita negra" (110). More recently, in 2007, Jorge Cortez released in the Centro Cultural Holver Martínez Borelli in Salta, *Un soldado de Malvinas*, a play about a soldier forgotten by the country that he fought for. In 2011, one of the most acclaimed playwrights in Argentina and current director of the prestigious Cervantes

theatre, Alejandro Tantanian, adapted Carlos Gamerro's delirious novel *Las islas* (1999) in a mega-production staged at the San Martín National Theatre, and in 2012, Julio Cardoso, the director of *Locos de la bandera*, presented *Islas de la memoria* in that same theatre, a reconstruction of the history of the islands and of the war using real testimonies and documents. In 2014, Rodrigo Cárdenas released *Malvinas, ningún cielo más querido*, by Carlos Balmaceda, a humorous piece about five British and Marxist Kelpers who live on the islands and see the 1982 war as the perfect time to carry out a socialist revolution. Finally, three productions directed by post-dictatorship playwrights like Arias and released in 2015 also focused on the lives of the soldiers and their families: *1982 obertura solemne* by Lisandro Fiks; *Los hombres vuelven al monte* by Fabián Díaz; and *Isla flotante* by Patricio Abadi.⁸

The disparity between the numbers of theatrical productions on the subject in both countries might speak to the fact that this conflict was only one of many military confrontations that the British participated in during the last century, whereas it was the only one fought by Argentine soldiers in the same period. Whereas in Argentina children still learn the Malvinas anthem in some schools (as the performers note in *Minefield*), there is a museum dedicated to the conflict (the Museo Malvinas e Islas del Atlántico Sur, which opened in Buenos Aires in June 2014) and the slogan "Las Malvinas son argentinas" can be found everywhere, from car stickers to the name of stadiums (the largest football stadium in Mendoza is called Malvinas Argentinas), in the United Kingdom the South Atlantic conflict is rarely a part of public discourse.

The growing interest in both the war and the postwar in Argentine theatre is also not surprising if we remember that even though this was a relatively short military confrontation it is one that has not really ended. As Bernard McGuirk put it in his 2007 book on the subject, it is an "unfinished business," one without proper

closure, neither in the political and diplomatic terrain, nor in the lives of its protagonists. Travnik said in this respect that many of the subjects portrayed for his project told him that the silent welcome they received upon returning to the mainland was more painful than the sufferings they went through on the islands. It is also common knowledge that after the war the number of Argentine soldiers who committed suicide (between three and four hundred) was higher than the soldiers who perished on the battlefield (though it is perhaps less known that the same fact applies to British combatants too).

Collateral Dramas

The focus on the postwar and on the “collateral dramas” of the war on British veterans (as well as on Argentine ex-combatants) is, as stated earlier, one of *Minefield*'s original elements. Even for the director it was a revelation to meet the British soldiers. Whereas the Argentines were eighteen-year-old conscripts, the British were mostly professional members of the armed forces. Given these key differences between both groups, it was difficult for the Argentines, she has claimed in interviews, to feel compassion for the British or to suspect they were in pain, too, after winning the war.

In the play, Marcelo Vallejo reveals that when Argentine soldiers returned to the continent, their superiors hid them in the military base and former concentration camp known as Campo de Mayo in Buenos Aires (also infamously known as the “Argentine Auschwitz” during the dictatorship), fed them so they looked as if they had been taken care of on the islands, and forced them to sign a document in which they promised not to tell anyone about what happened there. He felt so abandoned and betrayed that he started to drink and take drugs. He subsequently tried to take his own life by throwing himself into water knowing that he could not swim. Fortunately his

fellow veterans whom he was travelling with saved him just in time. Following that incident he got help, eventually becoming a professional swimmer.

Although the British soldiers were welcomed as heroes when they returned to England, they also “felt disconnected” from their family, friends and wives, as one of the performers says on stage. Lou also confessed that he never attends the gatherings of veterans in his country because he still feels guilty about mourning an Argentine soldier who died in his arms instead of mourning his own dead. Moreover, while the end of the war meant for Argentina the end of the dictatorship –writer Martín Kohan has said in this respect that “Malvinas es la guerra que convenía perder” (2014b) –, for the British the war resulted in a huge boost in popularity for Thatcher, ushering in a period that condemned many of those living in the UK (including former soldiers), particularly those living in the north of the country, to unemployment and poverty.

The use of a mixed cast that might lead to a plurality of biases and voices when approaching the past was a key feature of Arias’ previous productions, particularly her trilogy about the dictatorship: *Mi vida después* (2008), *El año en que nací* (2012) and *Melancolía y manifestaciones* (2012), recently published together in one book (2016). The performers of both *El año en que nací* and *Mi vida después* are all members of the post-dictatorship generation in Chile and Argentina respectively, while the performers of *Minefield* are all in their fifties. In the three plays, however, each of them represents a point of view about the events in question that both contrasts with and complements the others. In *El año en que nací* there is a scene in which the performers literally position themselves to the left or right of the other performers to indicate to the audience the heterogeneous nature of the ideological views of the cast and of their parents. In *Mi vida después* the daughter of a man killed by the dictatorship and the son of a disappeared father perform next to the daughter of

a member of the military who snatched a baby from one of his victims and raised him as his own. In *Minefield* those who were once enemies face each other again but in a different kind of (neutral) territory, the theatre, equally foreign to both (in the talk after one of the performances in London, Marcelo Vallejo said, to the surprise of both the audience and Arias herself, that taking part in the play meant being in a theatre for the first time).

Although they have clearly bonded on a personal level during rehearsals and travels, and have found ways of communicating with each other despite the language barrier (in the play there are subtitles in both English and Spanish), the Argentine and British veterans still have contrasting views on the subject of the sovereignty of the islands. Towards the end, one of the Argentine performers says that “entre los veteranos no discutimos el tema de la soberanía de las islas. Nosotros decimos que son argentinas, ellos dicen que los isleños son ingleses.” He then gives his own version of the history of the archipelago (“nosotros decimos islas Malvinas,” “los habitantes originales de las islas Malvinas eran los lobos patagónicos,” “desde 1833 la Argentina nunca dejó de reclamar las islas”), before one of the British veterans offers his own view on the subject (“they are called Falklands,” “the original inhabitants were birds,” “Argentina ended the negotiations started by the UN,” “the islanders voted to be British”). They end the discussions by agreeing to disagree and by telling the audience that they can find both versions, in either English or Spanish, on Wikipedia.

The issue of sovereignty, then, is not entirely absent from the play (how could it be?), but it is less relevant to the director than the collateral effects of both the war and the performance on the lives of the veterans. “I don’t know what are going to be the *collateral effects* of my work” (lecture at King’s, my emphasis), she said about her

plays, curiously using an expression taken from both the sphere of war and the relatively new field of post-traumatic stress disorder, thus reinforcing the parallelism between stage, battlefield, and therapy, three spheres that are constantly referred to, represented and sometimes interchanged in the play.

In addition, the public rather than the private nature of the performance, together with its collaborative nature (including directors, actors, technicians, and the audience), and the recurrent idea in Arias' work of gathering together, in the enclosed and observed space of the theatre, people who used to occupy opposite sides of history to see what happens, has led the director to refer to her own projects as "living creatures" and "social experiments" with a high degree of unpredictability.

Arias' decision to include a Gurkha in *Minefield* is, in this particular "experiment," perhaps the most risky. It was difficult to guess how an Argentine veteran of the Malvinas/Falklands war would react when confronted with this soldier, who fought for Great Britain for money and who acquired the reputation of being a true savage on the battlefield. "Los Gurkhas eran mercenarios asesinos," explains Vallejo at one point, "combatieron en Goose Green y mataron unos setecientos soldados. Con sus cuchillos cortaron cabezas, piernas, brazos, dejaron los cuerpos despedazados en el campo de batalla. Hasta les cortaron las orejas a los soldados argentinos y después se las comieron." These were the rumors that he had heard not only from other soldiers but also in the media. In his meetings with other veterans after the war, he used to say that he would have loved to have a Gurkha in the room to "agarrarme a trompadas." "Ahora," he concludes, looking at Sukri, "tengo uno acá, enfrente mío." But instead of starting a fight, he says that now he could easily have a beer with him. Later, they both participate in a sort of improvised "Talk Show" or

group therapy, hosted by Lou, in which each of them talks about how they feel about each other.

I am particularly interested in Arias' conception of theatre as a social experiment and as an affective site for collectively working through trauma.⁹ As pointed out by Rafael Spregelburd, renowned Argentine actor and director, there is a common prejudice against the therapeutic in art. And yet “¿Qué otro destino mejor para el arte que la sanación de las almas de quienes lo invocan?”. I will thus discuss what the performers gain and what they risk when reconstructing their war experiences in front of a group of anonymous spectators. The audience might also have a certain responsibility when attending this type of semi-autobiographical play, not least because their reaction when listening to such traumatic stories –especially when these responses include indifference, detachment, or morbidity– raise a number of questions about the ethical implications of reenacting war memories on stage.

Healing Stages

The idea that theatre can become a sort of laboratory to experiment with real social dramas, providing protagonists with an opportunity to reenact traumatic episodes of their past, is present in similarly provocative contemporary artistic projects. One performance or social experiment that was an inspiration for Arias when creating *Minefield* was *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), in which Jeremy Deller reenacted a 1984 miners' strike who were chased up a hill and pursued through a village, an image that he had seen on television and that acquired for him “the quality of a war scene rather than a labour dispute” (Deller's blog). The project involved eight hundred historical performers and two hundred former miners who had participated in

the original conflict. Deller described his work as “digging up a corpse and giving it a proper post-mortem, or as a thousand-person crime re-enactment.”

Furthermore, Harun Farocki’s *Immersion* (2009), a piece that Arias also explicitly acknowledges as an important influence on her work, also has much in common with *Minefield*. This 20-minute video installation consists of two screens. On one of them we see an American soldier with headphones and virtual reality glasses; on the other a videogame represents a scene that he lived during the war in Iraq. The soldier relates his experiences and a psychiatrist with a military uniform reproduces these experiences with a virtual programme and pre-design images of tanks, streets, houses, civilians, and so on. The soldier looks distressed, especially when he recalls how he witnessed the dismembered body of his partner. But the session ends, he smiles and the audience applauds. This was not a real reenactment of a war experience but a demonstration of a new form of therapy in the US designed to treat post-traumatic stress and prepared by military psychologists to show how this software works. “Vi esta película en un museo en París el año pasado,” writes Arias in an article about Farocki’s work, “y hacía mucho que no lloraba en un museo. Ninguna imagen real de la guerra por television, ninguna madre llorando a su hijo muerto con los brazos estirados en una foto del periódico produjo en mí la conmoción de la reconstrucción ficcional de una experiencia de guerra en videojuego” (“La memoria es un videogame”).¹⁰

Both *Minefield* and *Immersion* highlight the potential healing and affective powers of performance and simulation in the aftermath of trauma, and raise questions on identification and empathy with the audience. In addition, they draw on the role and responsibility of the media and technology in the production as well as the recording of violent events. *Immersion* reminds us that videogames are not only used

in post-traumatic therapy to trigger repressed memories, but also in the training of soldiers who go to war. In *Minefield* there are many references to the role that popular magazines, broadcasts, and television shows played in the South Atlantic conflict.

Moreover, in the three works – *The Battle of Orgreave*, *Immersion* and *Minefield* – the artists tread a fine line between esthetic experimentation and the risk of making a spectacle out of suffering (the “Talk Show” was one of the few features criticized in some reviews of *Minefield*, for example, in one published in *The Telegraph*) and of re-victimizing the performers, many of them clearly still vulnerable subjects. Arias herself stated that when the performers “are on stage they are strong enough but they are also vulnerable and the audience feel that anything could happen” (lecture at King’s). It is worth asking, then, whether there is a risk of going too far with artistic experimentation at the expense of the well-being of the performers.

There are some examples from both the play and what took place behind the scenes in which some might claim that the director perhaps overstepped that line. In her lecture at King’s College, London, Arias told the audience that Lou had had flashbacks during rehearsals and lost his speech, at which point she suggested that he go to therapy in Buenos Aires, something that, after initially refusing, he eventually did. In the play, there is also a sequence in which David (the psychologist of the group) pretends to be in a therapy session with Marcelo Vallejo, his patient on stage. Although the scene is, of course, scripted, the spectators somehow feel that they are witnessing a very private and intimate moment, voyeurs –perhaps unwilling– of someone else’s pain. Moreover, also during rehearsals, Marcelo was disturbed and (re)humiliated when one of the British soldiers reenacted a scene in which he demanded that Argentine soldiers clean up the excrement that they had left out in the open, the unpremeditated result of an improvised banquet that the defeated soldiers

had had after finding food in an empty house and eating for the first time in days, something that had happened to Marcelo for real. And during the performance, there were also times when the veterans appeared to be on the verge of crying.

The dangers of creating entertainment with suffering perhaps remain. But for Arias the recognition and standing ovations that the ex-combatants receive at the end of each performance empowers them. The whole process, she said during the lecture she gave at King's College, was ultimately a healing one, as proved for example by the fact that David started therapy and that Marcelo reconciled himself to English, a language that until rehearsals he could not bear to hear and that he is now learning.

Whether or not Arias' play offers a healing process for the performers is impossible for anyone but them to determine, but it is certain that *Minefield* both nurtures and legitimizes an alternative place of enunciation to those in which ex-combatants are often placed by other narratives of the war. Instead of portraying them as stereotypically suffering victims, or as too young ("los chicos de la guerra"), too old ("veterans"), or too crazy ("locos de la bandera") to have any authority to narrate the war, *Minefield* introduces the performers as complex individualities irreducible to any collective label.

In this respect, Arias further echoes Travnik's close-up portraits of former Argentine soldiers and his intention to de-naturalize the names that they have received in Argentina in the decades following the war, offering instead their particularized presence before the camera (Speranza, "Retratos en dos tiempos"). In Travnik's images, the soldiers are so different from one other (in age, physical appearance, expressions) that it is, in effect, difficult to fit them all into one of the categories mentioned above. For Natalia Fortuny, the particularity of each of these portraits is reinforced by the extreme close-ups used by Travnik and the way he shows the

singularity of each skin, the folds and shadows of these “rostros-paisajes de guerra” presented as if they were enigmatic maps: “la piel es aquí espacio fáctico, superficie y mapa del trauma.”

In *Minefield*, Arias also presents the veterans as singular subjects that resist being made into stereotypes. This is clear, for example, when she shows the diverse circumstances that led the Argentine soldiers to join the army. Sagastume says that he did not want to become a soldier but had no choice because at the time military service was compulsory in Argentina. Conversely, Vallejo liked being a soldier and was so good at it that he was asked to join the military long-term. But Arias goes even further than Travnik in her play by also disarming the labels and images ascribed to the British soldiers by the Argentines and vice versa. At one point, one of the British performers says that, until he met the performers in *Minefield*, the Argentines he had met were all arrogant, wounded, dead, or defeated. In the British plays mentioned at the start of this paper, which are focused on Thatcher, the war Cabinet, British soldiers, and their families, Argentines never appear as individual characters. Equally, British soldiers are rarely principal characters in Argentine fictions of Malvinas. In these narratives, they are “the enemy,” the professional soldiers, the representatives of the empire. They appear as a collective and invisible identity, both feared and hated. Most Argentine writers are not as interested in British soldiers as they are, for example, in exploring the figure of the perpetrator during the dictatorship. Cox and Glickman have also noted that the British figures that do stand out in Argentine theatre are the dandy, the nanny, the banker, the marine, the engineer, the train driver, and the most popular of all, the clown (10). British soldiers are, curiously, absent in this group. *Minefield*, in contrast to both of these respective approaches, delivers a more comprehensive image of those who went to war and, more importantly, it

provides the veterans with a space to speak in first person and to provide us with their own (self) portraits, thus enriching the gallery of characters created by both British and Argentine writers and playwrights in the past.

Friend or Foe?

In this attempt to complicate the images of those who participated in the war and to challenge dichotomies such as enemy/ally and hero/villain, through which the war is often narrated in both countries, three particular sequences force the audience to revise their preconceptions about the veterans, their armies and their governments.

The first one is when Lou tells the audience how he was caught by Argentine soldiers and subsequently taken to a plane, at which point he remembered the rumor about the “death flights” and thought that a similar destiny was in store for him. For the Argentine audience, the “enemy” becomes here a potential victim of the Argentine army, even a potential “disappeared”. It is almost impossible not to think about the thousands of victims that met their fate in the watery cemetery that is the Rio de la Plata during the military regime. Only this time the prisoner of the dictatorship is very different to the ones we are familiar with from the period.

The second sequence that disarms or complicates both the hero/villain and the ally/enemy dichotomy is also one of the most moving moments of the play. Lou relates how an Argentine soldier died in his arms and how he will never forget his face. This episode is first told in an interview that he gave as part of a documentary programme made in England only months after the war, and which is reproduced on a large screen on stage. He was young and still shocked by the event, with tears in his eyes. Before dying, the Argentine soldier spoke to him in English, told him that he once went to Oxford, and confessed that he didn't even know why he was fighting the

war. The scene points to a moment of revelation for the British veteran, the moment in which the enemy acquires a face (and a voice); one that looks and speaks surprisingly like him.

Finally, the third scene that challenges the audience's prejudices about who is the victim and who is the perpetrator in this war is also the one that gives the play its name: *campo minado*. Gabriel Sagastume and his fellow soldiers were on Mount Longdon, starving and without food for days. His companions decided to look for food in a house nearby, but on their way back they entered a minefield and were all killed. Gabriel was asked to pick up the remains with a superior officer. He tells the story to the audience using a miniature model of the landscape and toy soldiers, projected on the big screen on stage. But the mediations do not alleviate the impact of that terrible and sad memory, not least because later he learnt that the mines had not been put there by the British army but by the Argentine armed forces, who for some incomprehensible reason had never told its soldiers about them.

These three scenes – the one of the imprisoned British, the one of the soldier dying in the arms of his enemy, and the one about the Argentine soldiers killed by their own army – might point to the senselessness of the war and the fact that it was ultimately a tragic game of dominance and ambition led by Margaret Thatcher and Leopoldo Fortunato Galtieri, depicted as caricatures in the play by the performers wearing masks. Later in the play, this recurring reading of the war as an absurdity is reinforced when the Argentine performers tell the British that they were told that the British did not know why they were fighting, while the British were told that the Argentines were beaten by their own superiors and forced to fight for a dictatorship. There is something heartbreaking in these statements, as if they revealed that the

veterans were all being used as pawns in a chess game and that the real enemies had orchestrated a farce to feed their own obsessive desire for power.

And yet it is not accurate to reduce the war simply to a meaningless confrontation between two mad people, since in many ways the conflict gave – and continues to give – meaning to an important part of the pasts and presents of the performers. Moreover, falling back on that common interpretation of the war would be to reduce the veterans to mere victims, the last thing that Arias and the performers want us to think. They appear on stage because they have something to say and because they refused to be portrayed as either heroes or victims – both speechless figures, to be admired or pitied – in the narratives of the war.

In this particular aspect, these veterans are different from the ones depicted by Travnik, whose portraits are austere, silent, and laconic: the photographs are only accompanied by information about their ranks and military function. The interviews that the photographer had with the soldiers are omitted in the final series. Jens Andermann argues that Travnik's work is about the unspeakable and “unnamable” nature of the war experience and that “en cuanto *infantes*, ‘chicos de la guerra’, los veteranos han quedado, y siguen quedando, fuera del lenguaje — o, *mutatis mutandis*, Malvinas ha quedado en una zona de tiempo de la que ellos no pueden dar testimonio porque carecen de títulos para ponerle nombre de experiencia. Pasaron, por decirlo así, de ‘chicos’ a ‘veteranos’ sin poder contar su experiencia de ‘soldados’” (“Sombras de luz”).

In many ways, *Minefield* fills that gap and becomes that space of longing where soldiers tell their stories of struggle and survival both on and off the battlefield. Arias' play is pure noise: the music is loud, the performers speak different languages (Spanish, English, and Nepalese) and talk over one another. They have been silent

(and silenced) for too long, or have been spoken for by other voices and discourses. Now, they are claiming in *Minefield*, it is their turn to speak up.

Closure Without Closure

With *Minefield*, Lola Arias offers the veterans of the Malvinas/Falkland war a space of enunciation that asks for neither sympathy nor veneration or identification on the part of the audience. The ex-combatants reenact their war experiences and appear on stage as *witnesses*, not only in the sense of someone who was there and participated in the events, but also in the sense of being observers of their own lives. This displacement allows them to evaluate the events and memories with a certain distance and detachment, converting their subjective experiences into collective and national narratives. “When they become actors,” said the director at King’s, “they take distance, and see their lives from the outside, transforming their memories into history.”

In coming to terms with a painful past, the performers become an aid to one another, listening to each other’s memories, asking questions and offering comfort. Elizabeth Jelin suggests that in the task of bearing witness to trauma we all need the presence of (foreign) others, estranged to us, with the capacity to interrogate and express curiosity about the events, and also to demonstrate compassion and empathy for what we have been through (69). For these performers there is no other more other than their former enemies of war.

There is no real closure in *Minefield*. The veterans laugh together, sing songs next to each other, fool around, and help each other on stage; but that does not mean that they have overcome their differences or reconciled themselves to their own ghosts from the past. The Argentinians wear clothes with the slogan “Malvinas

argentinas” and during the final performance in London they all sang the Malvinas anthem together at the end of the performance. They even converted their hotel room in London into what they described as a “trench,” adorned with photographs of their fellow soldiers and of the time they went to Buckingham Palace and sang the Malvinas anthem to the Queen. In a similar vein, the British soldiers expressed their desire on social media to make their fellow soldiers proud with this play.

In an interview with *The Telegraph* Arias says in this respect that “the tension will always be there. This isn’t about reconciliation but about being able to live with disagreement. So far, we’ve been able to do something together –and that’s much more than our countries have managed (Cavendish).” The value of *Minefield* exceeds the limits of the artistic field and makes an impact beyond the realm of theatre. After one of the shows, one of the British performers received an email from a spectator who told him that after seeing the play his son said: “Papá, si hubiese más obras como estas no existirían las guerras, porque estos soldados no habrían aceptado enfrentarse” (Cruz). Similarly, Spregelburd, wrote that, despite the lack of institutional support in both countries, *Minefield* is a project that “bien mirado es capaz de evitar una guerra.” Perhaps these are exaggerations. But Arias’ play is nonetheless an *event* in the sense popularized by Alain Badiou: a breakthrough in the field of knowledge about the war, a point of no return in terms of how we think about both its consequences in the present and also about those who participated on the frontlines.

Towards the end of the play, there is some aggression and “confrontational punk mode” (Taylor), particularly in the last song, when they all play very loud instruments and “shoot” disturbing and defiant questions at the audience: “Would you go to war? Would you? What would you fight for? Your *patria*? Oil? Have you ever killed a man?” As stated by Spregelburd here “la obra invierte su escenario: seis

hombres afectados observan a una platea inquieta que ha venido a juzgarlos.” Indeed, this final song reminds the audience that they are not just passive spectators of memories that belong to others but are also an integral part of that history. The questions, screamed by the performers in a bellicose manner, bring to light the issue of the role of society in the Malvinas/Falklands war and postwar, a society that encouraged it and supported it and later abandoned and forgot its soldiers.

When I saw *Minefield* in London, many spectators felt uncomfortable with this part of the play, perhaps because they (we) were no longer the observers of this social experiment but had become part of the experiment itself.¹¹ *Minefield* is thus more than a play about old enemies and forgotten pasts; it is about our own responsibilities towards that shared history, its present legacies, and the impossibility of ultimately drawing a clear line between “us” and “them.”

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¹ This test invites mental health patients to make subjective interpretations about what they see on the cards.

² In recent years, Lola Arias has gained considerable recognition both in Argentina and abroad (she lived in Berlin for many years). In 2014 she received the prestigious Konex prize, awarded to the five most important figures of Argentine theatre between 2009 and 2013. One of her most acclaimed plays to date is the biodrama *Mi vida después* (2008), in which six actors born in the 1970s and 80s reconstruct their parents' youth during the 1976-1983 dictatorship through pictures, letters, records, old clothes, toys, and blurred memories. Her other works include the theatrical plays *Familienbande* (2009), *El año en que nació* (2012), and *The Art of Arriving* (2015), and the performances *Chácara Paraíso* (2007 Stefan Kaegi), *Majds* (2010-2011), and *Audition for a Demonstration* (2014). She is also the author of *La escuálida familia* (2001) and *Los posnucleares* (2011), among other volumes, and writes a regular column for the newspaper *La Nación*.

³ The term "autofiction" was coined by French writer Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 and describes texts characterized by a simultaneous or ambiguous pact with the reader in stories based on true events (autobiographical pact) but presented under imaginary frameworks (fictional pact).

⁴ I have explained this idea of "anachronism" and its relevance for post-dictatorship Argentine culture elsewhere. See Blejmar 2016, 25-26.

⁵ "Limit-cases" refer to plays that use real biographies of traumatic events for the script but combine them with fictional elements. In that context they are "testimonial projects, but they do not bring forward cases within protocols of legal testimony" (146). Limit-cases then are an alternative form of knowledge, one that does not dismiss the imagination as a medium for conveying experience.

⁶ In *Veterans* six Argentine veterans from the Malvinas/Falklands war remember and recreate their war experiences in spaces where they currently work or attend: a psychoanalyst reenacts a bomb explosion at the psychiatric hospital where he works; a triathlon champion (Vallejo) reenacts the death of his partner in the swimming pool where he trains; an opera singer performs the sinking of the General Belgrano in a theatre; and a former Argentine Air Force pilot uses miniature toy soldiers and planes to tell viewers how he narrowly escaped an air attack on the last day of the war.

⁷ *Arrivederci Millwall* is about Billy, a working-class south Londoner whose brother goes to the Malvinas/Falkland war. Billy supports Millwall football club and the play draws on the parallels between football and war to explore the impact of violence on the families of the soldiers. In 1990 the BBC produced a screenplay based on the work. In *Restoration*, a play set in the eighteenth century in England, there are no explicit references to Malvinas/Falklands but subtle allusions to the hypocrisy of Thatcher's politics and the mistreatment of the working classes during her administration.

⁸ Arias was born in 1976, the year of the military coup. Fiks and Abadi were aged ten and one respectively during the war; Díaz was born in 1983 and is the son of a soldier who survived the conflict.

⁹ The motivations of the director (a young woman who was only six years old during the war) and those of the performers (all men and war veterans) to take part in this "experiment" are not the same. Arias is interested in the personal memories of the war, whereas the veterans want to honour their comrades, their institutions, and those fallen in action. Arias has said in this respect that "the moments of conflict have often been more around their desire to remember and honour the dead and the reputation of

the regiments they fought for. They keep asking why we haven't included key moments such as the battle for Goose Green, and I tell them that we are not writing a history book but dealing in personal memory and if you weren't at Goose Green then it is not part of your memory. You are representing yourself on stage, not your country or your battalion" (Gardner).

¹⁰ *Minefield* also has some connections with two other pieces showing in the UK at the time it was being staged. Firstly, with the play *The Beanfield* (2016), a reenactment by young actors of the 1985 "Battle of Beanfield" between five hundred new age travellers and environmentalists and riot police at Stonehenge, England. Like *Minefield*, this piece (in turn influenced by Deller's film) also combines screens on stage and a playful style and aims to recreate an event that happened many decades ago. Second, Roman Krznaric's *Empathy Museum*, exhibited in the framework of the same festival (LIFT) that hosted *Minefield*, presents a shoe shop in which visitors are invited to walk literally in the shoes of a sex worker, a fireman, or a sewer worker, to listen to their stories of love, loss, and suffering through headphones, and to establish an empathic and physical bond with them. Both this project and Arias' play draw on the potential of reenactment to understand not only our own memories and experiences but also those of the people around us. In this respect, one of the most powerful moments in *Minefield* takes place when Marcelo Vallejo talks about the magazines that his father bought during the conflict but which he had never seen until the rehearsals. "Estas revistas [*Gente, Somos*] las compraba mi papá durante la guerra. Nunca las miré, hasta que empecé los ensayos. No imaginé que buscándome a mí lo iba a encontrar a él", he says while the screens on stage show a press photograph of a British soldier (Lou) with his hands up, caught by the Argentine army during the war.

¹¹ When I saw the play again in Buenos Aires some months later, I kept thinking about the reactions of the audience, and how that feeling of discomfort had in fact appeared earlier in the play. While in London the spectators laughed at almost every joke, in Buenos Aires the atmosphere was more somber, particularly in some moments, as when the British performers sing a very catchy and to some extent humorous song that was used during their training: "We're all going on a summer holiday, we're all going to kill a spic [Spanish Speaking person from Latin America] or two. We're all going to a summer holiday, maybe for a week or two, or three, or four...". Earlier in the play, I sensed a similar discomfort when the Argentine soldiers told the audience that during target practice and before the confrontation with the British, after shooting they used to shout: "Viva por mi país, maté un chileno," and also, "Viva por mi país, maté un *subversivo*."¹¹ Conversely, the jokes that did sparked laughter among the Argentine audience were mainly those not directly related to the war, such as when one of the British performers talks humorously about the number of psychologists that there are in Buenos Aires.