

## **Autofictions of Postwar: Fostering Empathy in Lola Arias’ *Minefield/Campo minado***

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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 that, except for those who were in front of the British troops on the battlefields, “Malvinas es una guerra sin imágenes ni relatos.” According to Speranza, the only things the Argentine people remember of the war are a 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).

Martín Kohan, however, has noted that already in 1982 the book *Los chicos de la guerra* by Daniel Kon—which was made into a film by Bebe Kamin in 1984—offered a number of testimonies of Argentine soldiers about their experiences in the South Atlantic archipelago (*El país* 269). Kohan shows that, unlike the soldiers of World War I who initially returned speechless from the battlefields, Argentine soldiers had a lot to say in the aftermath of the conflict.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, popular magazines such as *Gente* and *Somos* published a large number of war images that not only illustrated reports but also furnished the lies that formed part of the discourse of the 1976-1983 military dictatorship. Nevertheless, more than these testimonies and images of the war, what has perhaps most caught the attention of those who later studied the conflict 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, semi-deserted and inhospitable landscape, and

mysterious shape—writer Carlos Gamerro likens them to Rorschach stains—the Malvinas/Falkland Islands continue to function as a site around which Argentines’ deepest fears, obsessions, and desires often circulate as well as a blank canvas that can be filled with any imaginary narrative (Vitulo 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 Gamerro (*Las islas*, 1998), Rodolfo Fogwill (*Los pichiciegos*, 1983), and Patricio Pron (*Una puta mierda*, 2007), and filmmakers such as José Luis Marqués (*Fuckland*, 2000).

Following in this playful trend is *Minefield*—or *Campo minado*, as it was subsequently called in its Buenos Aires release—, a theatrical performance in which Argentine and British veterans re-enact their experiences on the battlefield.<sup>2</sup> Nothing is completely black or white in Lola Arias’ 2016 production, and this, I want to suggest, is one of its main achievements. Arias narrates the 1982 war in a performance that challenges 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 a more productive relationship between past, present, and future.<sup>3</sup>

I will specifically explore Arias’ conception of theatre as a “living creature” and a “social experiment” with a high degree of unpredictability, which is how she described the play in a lecture that she gave on June 6, 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, including 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.”<sup>4</sup> I will argue, however, that Arias not only successfully overcomes these risks with the aid of playful 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), thereby gaining visibility and producing an empathic connection with the audience.

### Old Wounds, New Alliances

*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. With a combination of film, acting, and testimonies, as well as technology, thunderous rock, and punk music, Arias puts on stage three former Argentine soldiers: Marcelo Vallejo, member of a mortar team and now a champion triathlete; Rubén Otero, survivor of the sinking of the ARA General Belgrano and now a member of the Get Back Trio, a Beatles tribute band; and Gabriel Sagastume, a soldier and now a criminal attorney. Their British counterparts are: Lou Armour, a former prisoner of the Argentines and now a special-needs teacher; David Jackson, who worked in intelligence during the war and who is now a psychologist; and Sukrim Rai, a Nepalese-Ghurka who fought in the war and only recently acquired British citizenship.

The six performers narrate and reenact on stage different aspects of the war 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. Arias explores once again 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, as well as trans-medial and ludic structures.

The play has its origins in a video-installation, *Veterans* (2014), that Arias made as a contribution to a project titled *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.<sup>5</sup> *Veterans* was also exhibited in 2016 in the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires as part of Arias' exhibition *Doble de riesgo* and will soon be released as a documentary film. For *Minefield* the director maintained the concept of that initial project—the idea that the performers were going to be veterans reenacting their experiences—and kept one of the performers (Vallejo). Arias auditioned sixty more former soldiers from each side before choosing the remaining five veterans. She worked in both countries separately and only 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” (“Memory”). This experience, Arias believes, “created a bond between them that was even stronger than the one created by war,” not least because, as one of the performers remarks 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 on stage the war in the South Atlantic. 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 Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the relatively small number of plays released in Britain, in Argentina in recent years there has been a growing number of productions focused on the Malvinas/Falklands War.<sup>7</sup> 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 past century, while it was the only one fought by Argentine soldiers in the same period. Whereas in the United Kingdom the South Atlantic conflict is rarely a part of public discourse, in Argentina, children in some schools still sing the Malvinas anthem (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); the slogan “Las Malvinas son argentinas” can be found everywhere; and the largest football stadium in Mendoza is called Malvinas Argentinas. 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 explains, it is an “unfinished business,” one without proper closure in the political or the diplomatic terrain, or in the lives of its protagonists.<sup>8</sup>

Among the Argentine contemporary productions that address the Malvinas War, Federico León’s *Museo Miguel Ángel Boezzio* (1998) is particularly noteworthy, as it shares a series of conceptual similarities with *Minefield*. These include the use of a real veteran on stage; the blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction; the inclusion of melodramatic episodes that draw a fine line between comedy and tragedy; the showcasing of the veterans’ personal archives as if they were pieces from a museum; the search for an empathic connection between the performer and the audience; the inclusion of “behind-the-scenes” elements or things that happened during rehearsals for the play; and an uncomfortable ending that foregrounds the responsibility of civil society in the traumas of the post-war period.<sup>9</sup>

Although the similarities between *Museo Miguel Ángel Boezzio* and *Minefield* are clear, Arias’ performance is, nevertheless, more playful than

León's, and it showcases veterans who not only remember their war experiences on stage but also reenact them despite having, unlike Boezzio, no experience in acting. Furthermore, *Minefield* produces a shift in relation to previous theatrical performances of the war, which include León's piece, by presenting to the audience an unprecedented cooperation on stage between former enemies, a means of delivering a more comprehensive memory of the event. Furthermore, the status of the play as what I call here an "autofiction of the postwar"<sup>10</sup> differentiates it from other cultural representations of the conflict in Argentina, including canonical texts such as *Los pichiciegos* and popular films such as *Iluminados por el fuego*, both of which are based on real events but more accurately described as fictions (rather than autofictions) of war. Conversely, *Minefield* is not so much a narrative about the war as it is a narrative about the *postwar*. In this respect, Arias has said that "[n]o 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 drawing a clear line between the war and the postwar and presents them 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.<sup>11</sup>

In the play the performers return to the islands through their memories and in footage of trips made after the war that is shown to the audience on a big screen displayed on stage. There is a moment, for example, when 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 the Malvinas as if theatre were a time machine, a concept present in many of Arias' productions. "This play," Arias said 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). The idea of return—not just a return *to* the islands but also a return *of* the islands to whom some consider 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 led by one of the Argentine veterans, the Get Back Trio. 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 rather, the islands—and what happened there—never left *them*.



Photo: Royal Court, Tristram Kenton

Arias' focus on a past event that is still an open wound for the performers and her use of real-life accounts presented in fictional frameworks raise 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?

The empathic collaboration between the performers and the viewers in the play offers a way out for some of these risks. As Alison Landsberg explains, "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 vulnerable subjects that reinforces victimhood and produces a sense of superiority in the audience, the experience of empathy "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 over-identification, mimesis, or appropriation. Certain aesthetic experiences, she argues, foster empathy by creating what

Gilles Deleuze has called an affective encounter with a sign, a sign that is felt rather than recognized, a sign that triggers thought and critical inquiry, “a sign that touches, but does not necessarily communicate the ‘secret’ of personal experience” (6). *Minefield* nurtures empathy in two directions: the Argentines and the British create an empathic bond with one another, 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. As pointed out by Argentine writer Mariana Enríquez in a radio review, *Minefield* “propone pensar el conflicto en conflicto.” In this 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 the Argentine and British people can live together, even in disagreement.

Indeed, 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 performers still hold contrasting views on the subject of the sovereignty of the islands. Toward the end of the play, 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: “[N]osotros decimos islas Malvinas”; “los habitantes originales de las islas Malvinas eran los lobos patagónicos”; “desde 1833 la Argentina nunca dejó de reclamar las islas.” One of the British veterans then offers his own view on the subject: “[T]hey 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 discussion 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 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” (“Memory,” my emphasis), she said about her plays, curiously using an expression taken from 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.



### **Collateral Dramas**

Even for the director it was a revelation to meet the British soldiers and to realize that their memories of the war were as harrowing as those of the Argentines. Whereas the latter were eighteen-year-old conscripts, the former were mostly professional members of the armed forces. Given these key differences between the groups, it was, according to Arias, difficult for the Argentines to feel compassion for the British or to suspect they were in pain, too, after winning the war.

In the play, Marcelo reveals that when Argentine soldiers returned to the continent, their superiors hid them in the military base and the former Campo de Mayo in Buenos Aires, 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, the fellow veterans with whom he was travelling saved him just in time. Following that incident he got help and eventually became 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 confesses 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—Kohan has said in this respect that “*Malvinas es la guerra que convenía perder*” (“Malvinas”)—, 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.

Facing each other again, but in a different kind of (neutral) territory—the theater, equally foreign to both—the British and Argentine performers show the audience that they can find a common ground to talk about the war without compromising their values and ideas but while still exercising an empathic understanding for what the other has gone through. The collaborative nature of the performance and the recurrent idea in Arias’ work of gathering together, in the enclosed and observed space of the theater, 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 type of 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,” Marcelo explains 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 one another.

The talk show/group therapy scene is crucial in the play, as it points to Arias’ conception of theatre as an affective site for collectively working through trauma. As highlighted by Argentine actor and director Rafael Spregelburd, there is a common prejudice against the therapeutic in art. And yet, Spregelburd asks, “¿[q]ué otro destino mejor para el arte que la sanación de las almas de quienes lo invocan?” In addition to 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 feel a certain responsibility when attending this type of semi-autobiographical play, not least because its reaction when listening to such traumatic stories—especially when these responses include indifference, detachment, or morbidity—raises 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 this work, Jeremy Deller reenacted a 1984 miners’ strike in which strikers were

chased up a hill and pursued through a village, an image that he had seen on television and that had acquired for him, as he comments on his blog, “the quality of a war scene rather than a labour dispute.” The project involved 800 historical performers and 200 former miners who had participated in the original conflict. Deller describes his work as “digging up a corpse and giving it a proper post-mortem, or as a thousand-person crime re-enactment.”

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 a U.S. soldier with headphones and virtual-reality glasses; on the other a videogame represents a scene that he lived during the recent war in Iraq. As the soldier relates his experiences, a psychiatrist dressed in a military uniform reproduces these experiences with a virtual programme and pre-designed 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 when 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”).<sup>12</sup>

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 stress therapy to trigger repressed memories, but also in the training of soldiers who go to war. Meanwhile, 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 aesthetic experimentation and the risk of making a spectacle out of suffering and of re-victimizing the

performers, many of them clearly still vulnerable subjects. The “talk show” led by Loud, for example, was one of the few features criticized in some reviews of *Minefield*. Arias has 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” (“Memory”). 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 that might suggest that the director overstepped that line. In her lecture at King’s College, 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 he initially refused to do but eventually agreed to. 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. Although the scene is scripted, the spectators nonetheless feel like unwilling voyeurs, witnesses of someone else’s pain. There were also times when the veterans appeared to be on the verge of tears. But for Arias the recognition and standing ovations that the ex-combatants receive at the end of each performance outweigh the dangers of creating entertainment with suffering. The whole process, she said during her lecture, was ultimately a healing one, as proved by the fact that Lou started therapy and that Marcelo started learning English, a language that until rehearsals he could not bear to hear.

While only the performers themselves can determine whether or not Arias’ play enables healing, it is certain that *Minefield* both nurtures and legitimizes an alternative place of enunciation for the ex-combatants to those in which they are often placed in other dominant narratives of the war. Instead of portraying them as stereotypically suffering victims, or as too young, too old or too crazy to have any authority to narrate the war, *Minefield* introduces the performers as complex individuals 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 the decades following the war—“chicos de la guerra,” “locos de la bandera,” “veteranos,” and “heroes de Malvinas”—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 Travník and the way he shows the singularity of each face, presenting the folds and shadows of these “rostros-paisajes de guerra” as if they were enigmatic maps: “[L]a piel es aquí espacio fáctico, superficie y mapa del trauma.” In *Minefield*, the singularity of each individual is clear in the diverse circumstances that led the Argentines to join the army. Gabriel had no choice because, at the time, military service was compulsory in Argentina. Conversely, Marcelo liked being a soldier and was so good at it that he was asked to join the military. The personalized image of the Argentine veterans not only contrasts with the way they have often been treated in Argentine narratives about the war but also with the way British soldiers used to see them. At one point, one of the British performers says in this respect that until he met the actors in *Minefield*, the Argentines he had met were all arrogant, wounded, dead, or defeated.

Similarly, the British ex-combatants are also depicted as individuals with heterogeneous backgrounds (some came from military families while others did not), experiences, and interests, which avoids the production of abstract or stereotypical images of the soldiers. This heterogeneity contrasts with the way they often appear in Argentine accounts of the Malvinas, where they are always “the enemy,” the professional soldiers, or the representatives of the empire. They have appeared in these imaginaries as a collective identity, both feared and hated.

Thus, *Minefield* challenges these prejudices and delivers a more comprehensive image of those who went to war, both British and Argentines, enriching the gallery of characters created in the past by writers and playwrights from both nations.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, Arias provides the veterans with a space to speak in first person and to provide their own (self) portraits to the audience. Autobiographical theatre is in this sense 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 not only difficult to categorize but who are also split subjects, selves that are at the same time both truthful and fictional, persons and characters.

### Friend or Foe?

In Arias’ attempt to complicate the images of those who participated in the war and to challenge dichotomies such as enemy/ally and hero/villain, three

particular sequences force the audience to revise its preconceptions about the veterans, their armies, and their governments. In the first one, 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 “death flights” and feared a similar fate. 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 who met their fate in the watery cemetery of the Río de la Plata during the military regime, only this time, the prisoner of the dictatorship is British.

In the second sequence, 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 was first told in an interview that he gave as part of a documentary programme made in England only months after the war. In the documentary, which is shown on a large screen on stage, Lou appears, young, with tears in his eyes, clearly still shocked by the event. 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 in the war. The scene points to a moment of revelation for the British veteran, the moment in which the enemy acquired a face (and a voice), one that looked and spoke surprisingly like him.

The final scene that challenges the audience’s prejudices about who was the victim and who was the perpetrator in this war is also the one that gives the play its name: *Campo minado*. While Gabriel and his fellow soldiers were on Mount Longdon, starving after days without food, a few of them 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 their remains with a superior officer. He tells the story to the audience using toy soldiers and a miniature model of the landscape, all projected on the big screen. But the mediations do not alleviate the impact of that terrible and sad memory, not least because later in his life he learned that the mines had been put there not by the British army but by the Argentine armed forces.

These three scenes underscore the senselessness of the war and the fact that it was ultimately a tragic game of dominance and ambition led by Thatcher and Leopoldo Fortunato Galtieri, depicted as caricatures in the play by performers wearing masks. Later in the play, this reading of the war as an absurdity is reinforced when the Argentine performers relate how 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. These heartbreaking statements reveal that the veterans were all being used as pawns in a chess game and that the real enemies, their national leaders, had orchestrated a farce to feed their own obsessive desire for power.

And yet the war should not simply be reduced 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 this common interpretation of the war would 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 refuse to be portrayed as either heroes or victims—both speechless figures to be admired or pitied—in the narratives of the war.

In this aspect, Arias' veterans are different from the ones depicted by Travník, whose portraits are austere, silent, and laconic, accompanied only by information about the subjects' rank and military function.<sup>14</sup> Jens Andermann argues that Travník's work is about the unspeakable and “unnamable” nature of the war experience:

[E]n 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”.

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 and the performers speak different languages (Spanish, English, and Nepalese) and often talk over one another. They have been silent (and silenced) for too long, or have been spoken for by other voices and discourses. Now 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 requests neither sympathy nor veneration from the audience. The ex-combatants reenact their war experiences and appear on stage as witnesses, not only in the sense of having been 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,” Arias said at King’s College, “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 one another’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 one more “other” than their former enemies of war.

There is no real closure in *Minefield*. The veterans laugh together, sing songs side by side, fool around, and help one 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 Argentines wear clothes bearing 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 through social media their desire to make their fellow soldiers proud with this play.

In an interview with *The Telegraph*, Arias says 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). 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 writes 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 in 1988 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.



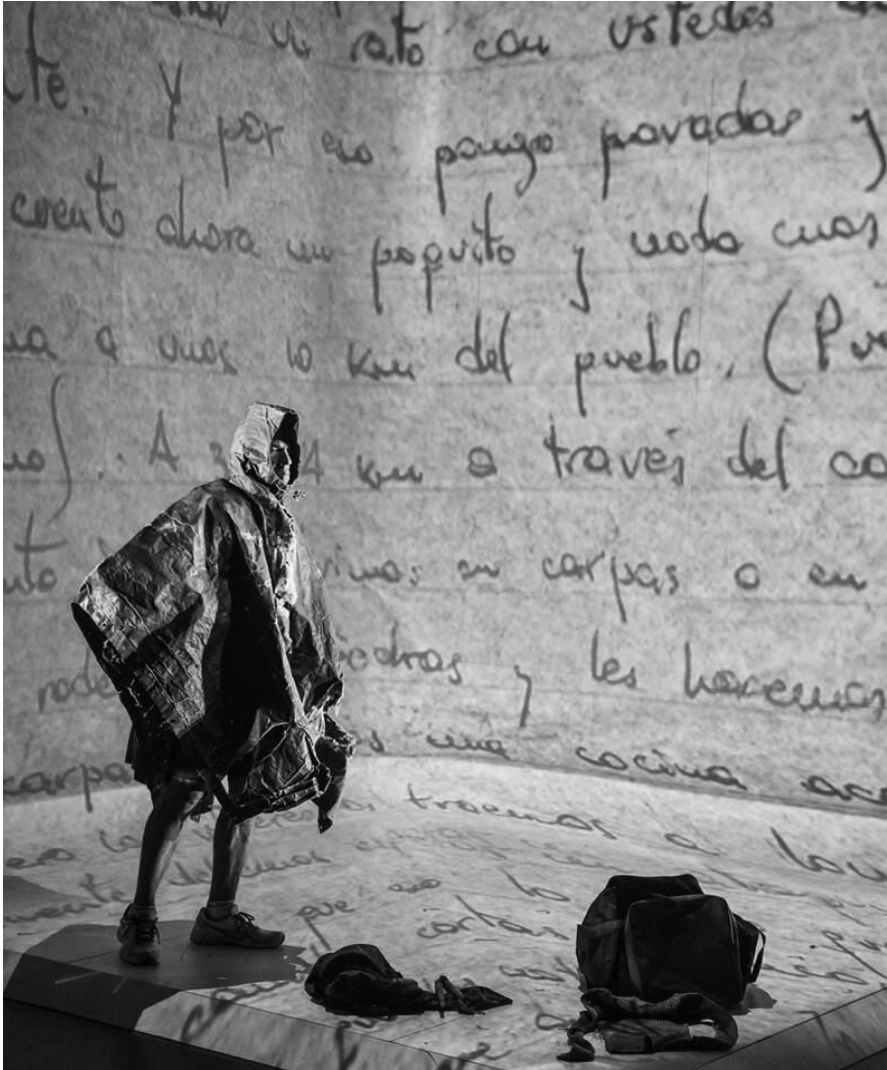


Photo: Royal Court, Tristram Kenton

Towards the end of the play, there is some aggression and “confrontational punk mode” (Taylor), particularly in the last song, when all the performers 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?” Here, as Spregelburd states, “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 members that they are not just passive spectators of memories that belong to others but also an integral part of that history. The questions, shouted by the performers in a bellicose manner, highlight the role of society in the Malvinas/Falklands War and the postwar, a society that encouraged it, supported it, and later abandoned and forgot those who fought in it. 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.<sup>15</sup> *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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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kohan also states that “[t]ampoco puede decirse que no hubiese interés en atender estos relatos; el libro agotó varias ediciones en pocos meses” (*El país* 269).

<sup>2</sup> 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 Premio Konex, 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 1980s 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 *Chácará Paraíso* (2007, Stefan Kaegi), *Maid*s (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*. There is a growing number of studies on the work of Lola Arias, particularly on *Mi vida después*. See Jordana Blejmar (171-96), Paola Hernández (115-28), Mariana Eva Pérez (6-16), Cecilia Sosa (105-28), and Brenda Werth (“La arquitectura” 338-56), among others.

<sup>3</sup> The use of a mixed cast and a plurality of biases and voices in approaching the past are key features of Arias’ previous productions, particularly her trilogy about the dictatorship: *Mi vida después* (2008), *El año en que nació* (2012), and *Melancolía y manifestaciones* (2012), recently published together in one book (2016). The performers of *El año en que nació* and *Mi vida después* are all members of the post-dictatorship generation in Chile and Argentina, respectively. In these works, each cast member represents a point of view about the events in question that both contrasts with and complements the others. In *El año en que nació* 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.

<sup>4</sup> “Limit-cases” refer to plays that use real biographies of traumatic events for the script but combine them with fictional elements. In that sense they are “testimonial projects, but they do not bring forward

cases within protocols of legal testimony” (Gilmore 146). Limit-cases then are an alternative form of knowledge, ones that do not dismiss the imagination as a medium for conveying experience.

<sup>5</sup> In *Veterans* six Argentine veterans from the Malvinas/Falklands War remember and recreate their war experiences in spaces where they currently work or attend: among them, a psychoanalyst reenacts a bomb explosion at the psychiatric hospital where he works; a triathlon champion (Marcelo 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 theater; 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.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Berkoff’s *Sink the Belgrano*, for example, released in 1986 at the Half Moon Theatre in London, addresses Margaret Thatcher’s role in the war with a character 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). In her study on British Falkland War plays, Melissa Green also mentions *Arrivederci Millwall* (directed by Nick Perry, 1985) and *Restoration* (directed by Edward Bond, first released in 1981 and rereleased in 1988 with the inclusion of subtle references to the war). *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 the Malvinas/Falklands War but subtle allusions to the hypocrisy of Thatcher’s politics and the mistreatment of the working classes during her administration. In 1998, Guy Masterson released *A Soldier’s Song*, a play based on a testimonial book written by a British soldier and his memories of the front line. 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. The play, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, first opened at the Royal Court Theatre in June 1983.

<sup>7</sup> In *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* (Griselda Gambaro, 1983) and *Las Malvinas* (Osvaldo Guglieminio, 1995). The first, written during the dictatorship and released just after the return to democracy, explores the effects of the war on the mothers of the soldiers. *Las Malvinas* is about a father who studied at Eton and who rejects his Argentine 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 at the Centro Cultural Holver Martínez Borelli in Salta *Un soldado de Malvinas*, a play about a soldier forgotten by the country for which he fought. In 2011, one of the most acclaimed playwrights in Argentina and current director of the Teatro Nacional Cervantes, Alejandro Tantanian, adapted Carlos Gamerro’s delirious novel *Las islas* in a spectacular production staged at the San Martín National Theatre, and in 2012, Julio Cardoso, the director of *Locos de la bandera*, presented in that same theater *Islas de la memoria*, 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 and released in 2015 also focus 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. Arias was born in 1976, the year of the military coup. Fiks and Abadi were 10 and 1, respectively, during the war; Díaz was born in 1983 and is the son of a soldier who survived the conflict.

<sup>8</sup> Juan Travnik reports that many of the subjects portrayed in his project told him that the silent welcome they received upon returning to the mainland was more painful than the suffering they went through on the islands. It is common knowledge that after the war the number of Argentine soldiers who committed suicide (between 300 and 400) was higher than the number of soldiers who perished on the battlefield. In the case of the British combatants, while the *Daily Mail*, the BBC and some veterans groups

have often reported that more Falklands veterans committed suicide than were killed in the war, a 2013 study especially commissioned by the Ministry of Defence in the UK stated that while 255 British soldiers were killed in action during the conflict, 95 committed suicide in its aftermath (Norton-Taylor).

<sup>9</sup> *Museo Miguel Angel Boezzio* was part of the Proyecto Museos (1994-2000) organised by Vivi Tellas. The project involved choosing a series of museums in Buenos Aires and allocating each one to a theatre director who had to use it as the subject of a performance. Federico León went to the Museo Aeronáutico and became fascinated with the section dedicated to aviation during the Malvinas War. In his piece León invites Miguel Angel Boezzio, an ex-Malvinas combatant and a former actor, to show his personal archive, his own personal museum, to the audience. This archive includes his CV, photographs of his girlfriend (who committed suicide after a fake coffin supposedly carrying his body arrived at her house), a certificate of attendance for a karate tournament, and a certificate of participation in a football championship between inmates of the Borda mental asylum. The performance starts when Boezzio hands out the programme at the theatre doors to the audience before delivering a sort of performative lecture on his life, a structure that resembles Arias' series of talks entitled *Mis documentos*. Like the performers in *Minefield*, Boezzio becomes then "a guide in the museum of himself" (León 78), although strictly speaking he is not alone on stage as León speaks to him via an earpiece during the play. At the end of the performance the walls of the theater are lit up and the audience can see all the documents and photographs displayed on them. Both León's piece and *Minefield* are political because, as Brenda Werth puts it, they pose questions to the audience about responsibility and perception. At the end of the play, Boezzio says: "Bueno, esto ha sido el Museo Miguel Angel Boezzio. Gracias por aceptarme en este país. ¿Cuál es la verdad? ¿Qué es mentira? A partir de lo que yo demostré. Porque ustedes tienen parte de mi culpa."

<sup>10</sup> 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 within imaginary frameworks (fictional pact).

<sup>11</sup> I have explained this idea of "anachronism" and its relevance for post-dictatorship Argentine culture elsewhere. See Blejmar 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> *Minefield* also has some connections with two other pieces that were showing in the UK at the time it was being staged. First is the play *The Beanfield* (2016), a reenactment by young actors of the 1985 Battle of Beanfield between 500 new-age travellers and environmentalists and riot police at Stonehenge, England. Like *Minefield*, this piece (in turn influenced by Jeremy 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 Krznarić'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 literally walk 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 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, captured by the Argentine army during the war.

<sup>13</sup> In the aforementioned British plays, for example, which are focused on Thatcher, the War Cabinet, British soldiers, and their families, Argentines never appear as individual characters. Likewise, Victoria Cox and Noah Glickman have 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.

<sup>14</sup> The photographer's interviews with the soldiers are omitted in the final series.

<sup>15</sup> 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, such 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*.” Conversely, the jokes that did spark 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.

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