

Dramaturgy as compassionate action:

Helen Benedict's *The Lonely Soldier Monologues*¹

by Talya Kingston

In 2012, the powerful Academy Award-nominated documentary *The Invisible War* exposed the problem of sexual assault in the US military². “When I watched that film”, wrote Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, “I was gripped with anger, disgust and determination that I was going to do something about it,” and in 2013 she introduced the *Military Justice Improvement Act* that would take the report of sexual assault out of the chain of command, allowing survivors the protection and advocacy of outside council. The film’s juxtaposition of images of deep patriotism and camaraderie with testimony of betrayal and entrapment had a similar effect on me: the stories felt personal and inspired action.

The Invisible War was inspired by Columbia Journalism Professor Helen Benedict’s 2010 book *The Lonely Soldier: the Private War of Women Serving in Iraq*. I learned that Benedict had transformed the same the material into a novel and a play, *The Lonely Soldier Monologues*. On Veterans Day 2013, in Northampton, Massachusetts, I produced and co-directed an immersive performance of this play, incorporating the testimony of five US women who had survived systematic harassment and abuse while serving their country in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Helen Benedict’s script is constructed as a series of monologues divorced from the context of the interviews that are described in detail in the book. While the stories themselves are deeply compelling, I felt that their narration in script form obscured the listener’s voice – Benedict’s voice – on the other side of the conversation. As a

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² According to the FY2012 SAPRO report released earlier this year by the Defense Department: an estimated 26,000 cases of unwanted sexual contact and sexual assaults occurred in FY2012, a 37% increase from FY2011. 25% of women and 27% of men who received unwanted sexual contact indicated the offender was someone in their military chain of command. 50% of female victims stated they did not report the crime because they believed that nothing would be done with their report.

result, the play script lacked the broader context and reflexivity generated by the book and film. It generated sympathy, but from a distance; it fell short of a direct call to action.

I had experienced this sort of passive witnessing of victimhood in other well-meaning documentary theatre pieces. Although they provide a window into another community's experiences and injustices, the audience may be left impotent with their new knowledge, and the anger and sympathy generated eventually dissipate for want of a concrete outlet. *The Lonely Soldier Project* was my attempt to insert positionality into our embodiment of the testimony, through site-specific engagement, physicality and active partnering with veterans, in order to make the monologues' effect on audience members more direct, real, personal and actionable. This paper discusses some of the production decisions that we made in order to create a safe immersive environment in which to jump-start conversations and action.

Like many other documentary drama practitioners, I admire the way in which the Tectonic Theater Project inserted their own stories as outsider interviewers into *The Laramie Project*, and how this transparency implies a subjective experience of events. While I was not interested in bringing Helen Benedict in as a character, I wondered whether unconventional use of the performance space might provide opportunities for the audience to experience the intimate sense of responsibility that she had felt when a soldier revealed her story. I was also influenced by the physicality and sense of company in Gregory Burke's documentary drama *Black Watch*. In this show a battalion of Scottish soldiers, recently returned from Iraq, are interviewed about their experiences, which they recount in flashbacks. They pull us into their memories through a mixture of direct address monologues and highly stylized physicality. The sense of company that drives the physicality of *Black Watch* is present in the film *The Invisible War*, where it is clear that, far from being victims, the women are strong and deeply committed to their job and comrades. Like an ensemble of performers, they have been trained to be physically present for

each other. When their trust in each other is betrayed at such a deep level as sexual assault, they are robbed of the support of this company and their ability to perform their duties is compromised. In order to pull this into *The Lonely Soldier* script, I partnered with Physical Theatre Artist, Troy David Mercier, who became a co-director. Together we decided that in order to make room for physicality we would need to cut back on the telling of the story through words. We also began talking about an immersive or promenade style performance where audience members could get close to, and involved in the action, and where testimony might be repeated, in order to replicate the frustration of survivors having to explain and re-explain what happened.

Since this idea inherently alters the script, we met with Helen Benedict to explain the cuts and production ideas that we were proposing to her verbatim play. She was understandably cautious and anxious to protect the words and stories of the people she had interviewed. Benedict agreed to our proposal with three stipulations. Firstly, that we kept the arc of the testimony as she had organized it in the book and script: before war, during war, after war. The second, an agreement that we don't alter their words and that, although in some cases the soldiers had gone public with their stories, we continue to use the pseudonyms that she had given them in the text. The third was that, although we were planning to add abstracted movement to the piece, we hire a military consultant (ideally a drill sergeant) for the production to ensure that uniforms, salutes, marches and cadences are correct and recognizable by military personnel in the audience³. Once we had agreed to work within these parameters, Benedict generously waived her performance fee and said that she'd like to be at a performance as a post-show resource.

Throughout the planning of the piece, I wrestled with an ethical quandary: as a civilian, liberal, non-American what right did I have to perform these stories? This was a discussion that I would have over and over again with my other co-director,

³ This was primarily recommended as a direct result of the success of the original 2010 LaMaMa Production of *The Lonely Soldier Monologues*.

and the first performer to enter our ensemble, Robyn Spateholts. In an effort to address these concerns, we set to work forging links with the military and veteran communities in our area. As a result of these meetings, we were co-produced by the Northampton-based *Veteran's Education Project*, a small non-profit dedicated to bringing veterans into dialogue with civilians, (particularly high school students who might be thinking of joining the army). VEP, in turn, put us in touch with a local chapter of *Soldier On* that provided housing for female veterans, and two of the *Solder On* veterans (including one Marine drill Sergeant on medical leave) became our military consultants through the rehearsal and performance process. The first time these consultants came to rehearsal happened to also be the first time our actors were in costume. This gave them a chance to teach the actors how to dress and move in combat uniforms, but it also provided a literal exchange of positions when we sat down to talk; where the actors were in uniform and the soldiers in civilian dress. I realized that even if no one came to see the performances, we were at least educating ourselves, an ensemble of ten actors, directors and designers who were trying to see our way through the testimony. During that initial story-swap, one of the soldiers thanked us for performing these testimonies, saying that it is exhausting and potentially damaging for those who had experienced abuses first hand to have the sole responsibility to speak about them and convince the civilian population of their importance. Although we continued to confront the ethical ambiguities inherent in performing the traumas of others, we came to feel affirmed in the social and ethical value of our role as theatre artists – as performers – in using performance to bring these hidden stories to light.

We felt a responsibility then to attract other civilians to our audiences, in order to educate them, but at the same time, we wanted to make sure that we also created a space that was welcoming to veterans and active service members. We sought a public, downtown space with wheelchair accessibility where we could offer the performances free of charge in order to accept donations at the door for the womens' housing project of the local *Soldier On* chapter. We eventually chose two interlinking rooms within First Churches in downtown Northampton. One room is a

parlor that is often used for support groups, including veteran-civilian dialogues. This location made the beginning of our production site-specific, and blurred reality and performance in a way that felt true to the documentary style and story we were telling.

Audiences were welcomed individually by our House Manager in character as a group facilitator who asked them to fill out a name tag, offered them apple cider and a donut and seated them in a circle of mismatched chairs. Arriving audience members were prompted to begin talking about how their upbringing affected their feelings about the military. As audience members entered, so too did the acting company who joined in the discussion in character, and the “before war” portion of the play began organically placing us all in the same space.

Two large sliding doors in a wall of the parlor space opened into a beautiful cavernous church hall with vaulted ceilings and wood paneling. This reveal propelled us into the second act, a space of memory, mostly lit by high-powered flash lights, where audience members were beckoned into images and stories, but also had the option to step away and watch from a distance if that was a safer personal choice. This staging partly reflected the fluidity of memory and our relationship to it, and partly a concern that the material would be psychologically triggering for those who had experienced war and/or sexual assault. For that reason, we also laid a couple of ground rules for our engagement with the audience: while performers did make direct eye contact, they never touched audience members, the soundscape deliberately didn’t include explosions or gun-fire, and several trained ushers mingling with the audience at every performance.

Most of the movement in the Second Act (during the war) was devised by the ensemble who had been trained in a shared physical vocabulary by Troy David Mercier. As is suggested in the script, while one soldier is recounting her stories of war, the other actors are performing within her story, often as men. We looked for group movement, often replicating movements taught to us by our military

consultants to imply company. At the same time, the actors also all came up with individual gestures and embodied images stemming from each unique character and story, so that as each story was performed the movements and images shifted to a new world. Lest this should suggest camaraderie between the women that was not present, we also used the eyes and bodies of audience members (often in very close proximity to the action) to mimic the male gaze of the soldier's unit. Our Sound Designer, Olivia Vazquez, underscored this at one point with a cue of soldiers marching and male voices chanting cadences.

Each cast member found moments in their stories to cement their individual gestures in the minds of the audience, in the manner of Brechtian *gestus*. This could be in the form of a freeze frame or by repeating a moment over and over to make it at once a mundane part of everyday life but also increasingly shocking. The young Army Specialist Maria Sanchez, for example, welcomed audience members into the Act Two space with the repeated instruction that:

There are only three things the guys lets you be if you are a girl in the military - a bitch, a ho or a dyke.
You're a bitch if you won't sleep with them.
A ho if you've even got one boyfriend.
A dyke if they don't like you.
So you can't win.

Another actor devised a movement in which she brought her right hand smartly to her forehead in a military salute and then slowly moved it in front of her mouth in a gesture of silence.

Scenic designer Amy Putnam constructed four large moveable fences, designed to look like deconstructed pieces of army trucks. They could be used to delineate performance space, close the audience in on an actor or be placed by an actor in front of a group of audience members in a defensive gesture; to guard from their eyes and push them away.

Through devising we came up with movement sequences that both abstracted the story and made it resonate beyond a more proscenium storytelling. The most overt example of this was what we referred to as “the paper machine”. In Miriam Ruffalo’s story, we hear how she was told to write down every instance of sexual harassment in a report and eventually ended up with a binder full of instances that were all ignored by her commanding officers. To represent the handling of these testimonies, we used a ream of continuous form fan-fold printer paper. In the performance, the ensemble acted as a bureaucratic ‘machine’ that stamped and then disregarded each piece. The long streams of paper generated in this way were then passed through the audience, who were thereby physically implicated in the handling of the testimony, and forced to make an uncomfortable choice between holding the paper, passing it on, or dropping it and walking over it to get to the next scene.

The Third Act begins with the disorientation of the soldiers returning to the United States, and how they are treated by their friends and family on return. As directors, we wanted the audience to experience rather than just witness this impossible transition, and so we moved from the nebulous space of memory to a section of the church hall nearest the doors which was suddenly brightly lit with fluorescents that made a proscenium through which we all passed while the ushers and cast muttered “Welcome Home” in a way that again forced the audience to choose to engage or not.⁴ Once audience members passed through, they were positioned in rows facing the soldier who told of their re-immersion into civilian life directly, making eye contact and moving closer as they spoke. At this point, we also decided that the actors should acknowledge each other as a community of veterans speaking out, much as we had seen in our interactions with the women in *Soldier On*.

⁴ Our military consultants had reported very mixed responses to how civilians saying “thank you for your service” made them feel, and greeting the audience with a luke warm “welcome home” gave them a context for the testimony of veterans returning home that seemed to reflect this ambivalence.

Benedict's script leaves us with Santiago Flores, a Native American Army Sergeant saying:

Everything we've done in Iraq is a lie. And I'm very ashamed that I didn't see it sooner and stand up against it. I was a drill sergeant. My job was to teach other people's children how to kill.
People ask me, how could I, as a spiritual person, teach people to kill? How, as a mother, could I send my own sons to war?
I ask myself that. I bought into the whole thing. I thought it was the honorable thing to do.
I can only hope that my ancestors will forgive me.
Or that I will be able to forgive myself.

Benedict's original script then calls for the entire company to repeat a popular army cadence, which set next to Flores's regret becomes ironic:

Bomb the village, kill the people
Throw some Nepalm in the square
Do it on a Sunday morning
Do it on their way to prayer.

We were concerned that this was emotionally didactic and lacked the reflexivity that we were hoping for. In an early invited reading of the play, our audience members reported that, while they wanted to applaud the actors, they felt strange clapping at this ending. In order to separate the actors from their characters and to connect the testimony that Benedict collected in 2009 with current action, we changed this ending. In our production, Flores's line, "I can only hope that my ancestors will forgive me. Or that I will be able to forgive myself" is immediately followed with a sound cue montage of voices from the Military Commanders testifying in the Senate about sexual harassment and abuse in the military. While this three-minute montage was playing the actors removed their army boots, in a symbolic stripping of character, and held them out towards the audience. One by one they introduced themselves, for example: "My name is Trenda Loftin and I performed the words of Sergeant Terris Dewalt-Johnson", placing the boots on the floor and taking a step back, thereby leaving the boots to represent the real, absent soldier whose stories we had heard. This ending allowed the reality of the situation to resonate imbuing our response with political urgency, while at the same time acknowledging our

position as performers passing on the testimony and giving full credit to those who actually lived it.

By placing our performances on the weekend of Veteran's Day and four days before the bipartisan Military Justice Improvement Act was debated by the Senate, we hoped to draw civilians and veterans into an alliance to take the prosecution of sexual assault out of the chain of command. Rather than speaking to cast members after the show, audiences were directed to various veteran resources, petitions and discussion boards. As a performance ensemble we aimed to be conduits for these connections, and although we sought to raise consciousness and promote dialogue, the play's value as a call to social action would ultimately require it to incite action outside of the performance space.

Note: a five-minute video montage from *The Lonely Soldier Project* can be found here: <http://vimeo.com/84069194>

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