

“What Was the War Like?”



Experiencing *Surrender*; Talking with Josh Fox

James R. Ball III and Gelsey Bell

Experiencing *Surrender*

The Arrival

The performance has already started with a few people in fatigues barking orders at a long line of civilians on the street. Every audience member must sign a release form and, so it seems from the title of the show and the tone of the actors' voices, surrender. Though the command form of “Surrender!” will later spin into a more elaborate poetics of war and human nature that will require every audience member to decide who or what they are surrendering to, the initial cul-

James R. Ball III is a PhD candidate in the Department of Performance Studies at NYU. His research considers the United Nations and the International Criminal Court through the lens of theatre and performance, identifying the theatrical conditions of possibility for the work of global politics. He also teaches Studies in Shakespeare to undergraduates in NYU's Department of Drama. jim.ball.three@gmail.com

Gelsey Bell is a PhD candidate in the Department Performance Studies at NYU, currently completing her dissertation on 20th-century American experimental vocal performance. She is also a singer-songwriter with two studio albums, an experimental vocalist, a core member of the ensembles thingNY and Varispeed, and one of TDR's Critical Acts Editors. For more information, please visit www.gelseybell.com. gelsey@gelseybell.com.

ture clash of casual New York–theatergoer chit chat and disciplined US military command summons us to attention in the most basic sense. The soldiers dictate the terms of our engagement and provide us with our first opportunity to submit or resist. *Surrender* never ceases to interrogate the ways in which pleasure and pain derive from the oscillation between passivity and activity, powerlessness and agency.

Surrender is a participatory theatrical production, “a simulated war deployment experience in three acts” as the subheading to the show tells us, created by the International WOW Company, conceived and directed by WOW artistic director Josh Fox, and written by Fox and Army National Guardsman and writer Jason Christopher Hartley. Over the course of the epic three-and-a-half-hour (at least) event, audience members learn basic combat training, are deployed through an elaborate set to use their training, and return “home” to an episodic drama on a proscenium stage, in which selected participants are asked to perform in scenes with the aid of a karaoke-like teleprompter. The show premiered in late October 2008—about a week before Barack Obama was elected US president—at the Ohio Theater in New York City, and ran through the first half of November. It then reopened for three weeks at the Flamboyant Theater in the Clemente Soto Velez Center, also in New York City, in January 2009. The show was nominated for the 2008/09 Drama Desk Award in Unique Theatrical Experience.

In some respects, the concerns of 2008 seem farther removed than ever from our current moment: the last convoy of American troops left Iraq on 18 December 2011, and in the current election cycle, questions of foreign policy have so far taken a back seat to domestic economic issues in both our national discourse and daily lives. Of course it may be that when our focus is elsewhere, the traumas of our recent history are most likely to reappear. *Surrender* has a curious way of popping back into one’s consciousness unexpectedly, and the show’s novel form and content remain germane and profound in 2012.

Forms of interactive and immersive theatre have continued to proliferate in New York City since *Surrender* was first produced. In 2011 alone Punchdrunk staged their sprawling *Sleep No More* in a warehouse on Manhattan’s west side and the Woodshed Collective’s *The Tenant* took up residence in the West-Park Presbyterian Church on Amsterdam Avenue, while the videogame-inspired *Red Cloud Rising* (created by Gyda Arber) had spectators traipsing about Lower Manhattan and *Lush Valley* engaged audiences at the HERE Arts Center in a theatrical dialogue about founding a more perfect community. Each of these shows is an example of the trend towards interactivity and participation in theatre and performance in New York. *Surrender* used interactivity to push the bounds of what political theatre might do, and subsequent productions have followed suit.

As we head toward another presidential election in the United States, it is worth remembering that the problems *Surrender* noted four years ago have hardly passed. American troops are still deployed worldwide, and as they return home, the violence of the battlefield often returns with them. The personal traumas that characterize the experience of war cannot be shunted aside, and in this respect more than any other, the efforts of *Surrender* to communicate this experience, to give a civilian audience terms they can use to address it, will never cease to be relevant.

Josh Fox founded the International WOW Company in 1996 and has since created and produced over 30 theatrical events in Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan, Germany, France, and the United States, and has more recently begun to work in film. *Memorial Day* (2008) is a full-length feature film, and the documentary *Gasland* (2010) won a Special Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award. *Surrender*

Figure 1. (facing page) Audience members drill the proper way to carry, raise, and fire their replica rifles at the start of International WOW Company’s Surrender. The Ohio Theatre, October 2008. (Photo by Spencer Gordon)



Figure 2. Aaron Unger (foreground) in *International WOW Company's Bomb*, directed by Josh Fox. Flamboyan Theatre, New York City, June 2002. (Photo by Josh Fox)



Figure 3. Deborah Wallace (foreground) in *International WOW Company's Expense of Spirit*. Ohio Theater, New York City, December 2004. (Photo by Josh Fox)



Figure 4. Katie Mullins, Irene Crist, Harold Kennedy German, and Beth Griffith (left to right) in *International WOW Company's You Belong to Me*, directed by Josh Fox. PS122, New York City, January 2007. (Photo by Josh Fox)

continues the preoccupation of many earlier WOW productions with issues of war and the military, including *The Bomb* (2002), which covered topics from J. Robert Oppenheimer's work on the atom bomb to the events of 9/11; *The Expense of Spirit* (2004), about a Brooklyn mother who refuses to accept the news that her daughter has been killed in Iraq; *The Comfort and Safety of Your Own Home* (2004), which included images that referenced both torture at Abu Ghraib and the prison at Guantánamo Bay; and *You Belong To Me* (2006), which was set during the last moments of the American Civil War, the final days of World War II in Germany, and in a present-day US military hospital in Germany treating Americans stationed in Iraq.

Much of the inspiration for *Surrender* developed out of Fox's experiences preparing for *Memorial Day*, when he met Jason Christopher Hartley, who trained the actors in basic combat procedures. *Memorial Day* begins as a girls-gone-wild weekend in Ocean City, Maryland, that quickly spirals out of control before segueing into a loose reenactment of American soldiers' actions in Abu Ghraib. Hartley had recently returned from Iraq, where his New York Army National Guard unit had been stationed since 2004. His controversial blog, for which he was demoted, had also been published as a book, *Just Another Soldier: A Year on the Ground in Iraq*, in 2005. As the press release for *Surrender* states, the creators of *Memorial Day* found the basic training a "surprisingly fun, deeply enlightening experience that went beyond words

and challenged some of our most fundamental assumptions” (International WOW 2008). After the filming was completed, Fox approached Hartley about a subsequent collaborative project. *Surrender* was the result, with a first act written primarily by Hartley, comprising the crash course in basic combat training that he leads; a second act essentially written by the audience as they are led through the maze-like set of different combat scenarios; and a third act written by Fox, using the “dramatic karaoke” concept to facilitate audience participation.

Audience members sign up for one of two roles, participant or observer, and are directed to perform accordingly. The “observers,” a minority of the audience members, are escorted to a corner of the lobby before the training begins and seated on the sidelines. Actors and participants alike mostly ignore their plain-clothed presence during the event. And while there is a comfort and safety in the invisibility of experiencing the piece as an observer, there is also a disempowered melancholy in the observer’s lack of agency. In the second act, observers act like UN peacekeepers watching the action to see if the standards of the Geneva Conventions are upheld. Of course, they have no recourse if they find that they are not.

Each “participant,” on the other hand, is regularly given the opportunity to act. As participants, we are issued an army uniform and a pair of boots in the lobby and ushered into the theatre, where sheets strung throughout a large warehouse provide privacy for two dressing rooms. The intensity of the soldiers’ voices and attitudes creates an atmosphere of tension in which no one seems to be doing what they need to do correctly or quickly enough. As Hartley explains, the goal is to “always keep the people at least a little off-balance. [...] Always have an elevated heart rate. Your motor skills kinda go to crap when you’re the least bit stressed-out, [and] making simple decisions can be difficult” (Hartley n.d.). As we dress for action, soldiers keep the pace up by dressing us down. The initial costume-changing experience is an essential and fitting overture to the event as a whole. Feeling unprepared and vulnerable, momentarily in our underwear among strangers, the desert camouflage is something we each must fit into. Whether we are familiar with fatigues or not, it conjures in each of us a change of mind and bearing—something different from the attitude of the clothes we wore into the theatre. It also prepares us for military discipline—for instance, there is a certain way we have to tie the boot laces—marking the beginning of being trained “to be trained,” as Fox told us later.

Simultaneously, the division between actor and audience begins to disappear quite literally before our eyes. Actors can be identified—they are the ones yelling at you for tying your shoes wrong, having your nametag hung incorrectly, or taking your time. And yet, that man in a uniform crossing through the space with purpose, is he an actor or an audience member that has taken on a role? The fourth wall separating actor and audience is here the hierarchical distance between officers and grunts. By the time the sheets are taken down, we know our role, know our place. Before we can begin milling about in what is now revealed to be a warehouse-sized space, Jason Christopher Hartley takes control.



Figure 5. An audience member is handed desert camouflage fatigues as she enters the Ohio Theatre to participate in International WOW Company’s Surrender. The Ohio Theatre, October 2008. (Photo by Spencer Gordon)

Act 1: Basic Training

Hartley begins by instructing us to put our right hand on the left shoulder of the person next to us and spread out. Just as the fourth wall has fallen, down come the physical barriers between audience members. As it continues, a great deal of the event is constructed through touch. The forced intimacy that begins to form our community exacerbates political discomfort. Proximity to and distance from other bodies become the key to both our physical experiences and the social web these experiences begin to weave. Hartley has been talking to us: “If you read the FAQ online and it said there would be no strenuous activity [...] your recruiter lied to you.” Push-ups now, just 10, a taste of the only punishment the production doles out. Pay attention, he warns us, or push-ups will be your whole night at the theatre. Our bodies are prodded into a new shape, and already some participants are losing their way. A woman with tears in her eyes seems far outside of her comfort zone. An actor notices and approaches her, giving her the opportunity to step out for a few moments, but she declines.

We are each given a replica M4 rifle, a standard issue in the US military for troops in Iraq and elsewhere. An object or prop has the ability to stabilize a person’s attention. In any situation, when you are feeling self-conscious or don’t know what to do with yourself, the intricacies of getting to know an object and then taking care of it can fill the space. A gun is, literally, *the* loaded object, power personified, a superhuman extension of the body. In training, we are taught which side to shoot with (it is not as simple as being left- or right-handed), how to hold our rifle, and how to adjust our posture. Our plastic replica rifles are clearly fakes, but weigh more than expected: they feel like more than toys. The relationship between soldier and weapon is significant as the technology of warfare conditions those who wage war. In his book, Hartley wrote about the moment when he received an M4 before deploying to Iraq for the first time: “Her name is Wazina. She’s dark and beautiful” (2005:65). Several months later, returning to Iraq after a few weeks on leave, he confessed:



Figure 6. Jason Christopher Hartley instructs newly arrived audience members in the proper care and use of their replica M4 rifles at the outset of International WOW Company's Surrender. The Ohio Theatre, October 2008. (Photo by Spencer Gordon)

I had missed Wazina. It felt good to hold her again. I loved how she looked, I loved how she smelled. It's funny how attached you can get to a weapon. I wanted to keep her after we returned to the States. I wanted to put her on the wall over my bed. An assault rifle is the ultimate security blanket. (296)

Even if we did not name our weapons, we certainly had a chance to hold and smell them. Our bodies became molded to the weapons we were given; the soldier became a unit composed of flesh and firearm. Rifle butt against the collarbone, feet at slight angles, elbows in, head cocked, a slight crouch. Two rifle positions: low-ready, until you intended to kill, then a quick succession of movements: raise the rifle barrel three inches, flip the safety with your thumb, pull the trigger three times, put the safety back, bring the rifle down. There were no sound effects, pulling the trigger made little more than a plastic click, but the intensity of the moment inevitably imparted the gravity of firing a gun.

Violence destroys social bonds, or at least the possibility for generating them. Shooting an enemy is a refusal to form a new community with that individual, and yet it brings the processes of abjection, which can build communities, into stunning relief—expelling the other, “them,” even (or perhaps especially) violently, constructs our sense of “us.” By being shown the way in which we would be charged with breaking down the social lives of others (by taking their lives), we are also shown how we establish a bond between squad-mates contingent on cooperative violent acts.

This is not the environment for socializing; we are not even given the chance to learn the names of the others in our newly formed squads of six. Instead we go through the physical and verbal intimacies of securing potentially hostile urban spaces: clearing rooms of aggressors, detaining non-combatants, and gathering what information we can. Wooden and metal dowels mark out a room with two doors on the floor. Our squad “stacks up,” lines up, outside the door, bodies touching bodies—“nut to butt or bush to tush” as Hartley put it to us. When we are all together, the soldier at the end of the line taps the thigh of the next soldier, on and on up the line. Physical contact becomes the de facto language through which our shared experience of this troubling encounter binds us together. Into the room we go, rehearsing again and again our order and path through the space, shooting at an actor playing a soldier playing an insurgent, when necessary. Our roles diversify—now some are charged with searching the bodies of prisoners and corpses. Fox (who was present during every performance, filming, whispering to actors, and then running sound during the third act) and the actors carefully select specific audience members for tasks. For instance, participants asked to search bodies are observed to be gentle and considerate, and almost always female. Making physical contact with the actors, hands on their bodies searching for contraband from head to toe, the searchers are pushed by their squad leader to be as thorough as possible and not shy away from the crotch, raising, for some, the dilemma of, “Is this *really* okay?”

We are getting a dress rehearsal for our mock-deployment in the second act. From Bertolt Brecht to Augusto Boal, politically oriented avantgarde theatre has sought to engage its audience—from provoking thought to activating new strategies for solving problems—in order to incite political activity. Here, the actor on the stage is the spectator as well (see Boal [1974] 1979)—any separation between audience and protagonist has been erased. At the same time, this does not mean the actor/spectator disappears into the role she finds herself playing (see Brecht [1964] 1992)—the audience member/soldier is unable to give in fully to the fantasy, but cannot help but present the character of soldier to those she performs with. Neither participation nor Brechtian alienation fully addresses the mechanism by which *Surrender* articulates its politics. Rather, “proximity” might be a more useful term. Actor, spectator, and role all converge in the body of the audience member, but unlike Brechtian alienation or Boalian participation, touch, pacing, and the need to make quick decisions and “act in the moment” prevent the critical distance central to the theatre techniques of those theorists. Here, reflection can occur for only fleeting moments or must be deferred until after the conclusion of the show.

Surrender is not patient. The brain slips out of conscious thought, into instinctual, uncritical responses: not a facile identification with a character or situation, but something deeper. Hartley describes it as a “head fuck” (Hartley n.d.). Surprised by the aggressive attitude he took on leading the training, particularly because his personality is not normally authoritarian, he began to ask himself, “Who am I? Am I acting? [...] Am I playing a character or am I playing myself?” (Hartley n.d.). Reflections like Hartley’s become either the privilege of those for whom the events of the show remain in the past, or dissolve in a flash as new events force new decisions. Though such reflective knowledge becomes deferred in the proximate place the drama situates its audience, we are given access to forms of tactile knowledge that are often excluded from the visual and verbal regimes that prevail in the theatrical medium. The audience will get an inkling of the bond of soldiers, the bond that may be the origin point for any sense of nationalism and patriotism. But more importantly, the audience will know the abyss that emerges between those who have experienced war and those who have not. In this abyss, any efficacious political project must be articulated anew, for indeed, what do you say to a play that wants to tell you, “war is awesome”?

Act 2: Deployment

The thunderous and deafening looped sounds of helicopter blades, heavy metal music, sirens, gunshots, and explosions announce a change of scene. Our training is put into action as each squad enters mock combat in the scenic constructions that line the perimeter of the space. Though easily ignored during the first act, seeming like stored junk pushed aside to make space for training, the set is now revealed to be a warren of porous rooms simulating an Iraqi city, with screened windows to the central space (which observers use to watch the action) connected through doors and winding hallways populated by actors-cum-civilians and civilians-cum-insurgents. The lighting is dim and the sonic landscape is still deafening, forcing everyone to rely on the physical cues we have been trained to use or to yell in order to be heard. Each squad begins in a separate room, and each room plays on the same actions—move in, fire on “hostiles,” search civilians, stay alert, and move on.

Our first room is small, not more than 150 square feet, and at its center a person sits bound to a chair, a hood over his or her head. Someone in the squad searches the individual quickly, deciding how to respond to the moans and whimpering heard from under the hood. The scene is unnerving, our actions more so. We are tense, waiting for surprises, and the fact that so little has occurred only exacerbates the tension. We stack up on the wall leading to the exit, tap up our partners next to us, and move on. In the next room a woman stands alone as we enter—no, wait, behind her, out of that pile of cloth in the corner (are we in an action movie?) a man with a gun pops out, and our 90 minutes of training kicks in. Thumbs flip small plastic switches, index fingers squeeze triggers, and the actor with the gun follows through with a convincing, if bloodless, death (perhaps we are in a video game). The first kill of the play.

It is a curious non-event in this world—there is no sound effect, no makeup, just an audience member with a toy gun and an actor who knows how to fall well. But we all know what has been represented. The minimalism of the event prevents it from becoming maudlin, but also keeps the participating audience members engaged. We are forced in an instant to decide the extent of our participation—do we gleefully give ourselves over to the play’s game, or do we look for ways to resist the representation of an event we ideologically oppose? Some audience participants laugh and make jokes, while others retreat further into themselves. Audience members can fully embody their anti- or pro-war politics or move on instinct only later to consider the ethical system they had engaged. A unique story is created for each individual’s experience: perhaps you build a reputation in your squad for being the first to raise your gun and shoot; perhaps you embarrass yourself by losing your gun after putting it down to search a corpse; perhaps you are wounded and must be carried to the hospital section of the set and sit out the last few rooms.

A subsequent room featured another reminder of intimacy; we come upon a man and woman in bed, both topless and distraught. The man tries to calm the woman, soldiers move in to search them, and from under the pillow she grabs a gun and begins firing on us. At once we fire our guns in response. The casual nudity mixed so effortlessly with violence seemed sordidly gratuitous at first, the easy choice for a simulation that wants to pull no punches, but then war itself is often sordidly gratuitous. Now our squad leader turns to a young woman in our squad: “You look like you’ve been hit, sit down, we’ll get you out of here.” We carry our wounded compatriot down a short staircase into a basement of the theatre where cots are set up. Two actors playing medics receive us, take the wounded squad-mate, inform us of her prospects, and send the rest of us back into the field. Like most of the second act, this episode feels hectic, with a fair amount of the adrenaline that accompanies emergency pumping through our veins, leaving us no time to reflect and only enough to do what needs to be done. If we were in constant physical contact with our fellow squad members—with other actors and spectators—so too were we in constant contact, both physically and intellectually, with the play itself. There was no distance from which to gauge one’s actions; one simply acted. As Fox puts it in the interview that follows: “*Surrender* is like building a world where you can’t see what you’re doing until it’s too late.”

In another room we enter with our weapons drawn to find two women; one falls immediately, apparently shot, though we aren’t sure by whom. The other woman stands aside, alternately distraught and stoic, and one of us is commanded to guard her. She stares at her guard, not speaking, not weeping (though one tear may fall down her cheek), simply locking eyes and letting the face-to-face encounter speak for itself. As Emmanuel Levinas explains it, “To be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill. It is also the situation of discourse” ([1951] 1996:9). Moments such as this are few and far between within *Surrender* and perhaps only occur to those audience participants who are given certain tasks or are open to them. Most of the time, the play keeps you in a place where you *are* able to kill the other, where discourse is *not* possible, because you are compelled to speak, hear, and follow commands—words placed in your mouth from standardized phrases like “Room clear!” and later the audience script used in



Figure 7. A participant audience member searches the body of a dead civilian or insurgent in *International WOW Company's Surrender*. *The Ohio Theatre*, October 2008. (Photo by Spencer Gordon)

the third act. A silent moment of interaction, of locked eyes, functions like a beacon, haunting us throughout the rest of the event.

By now we are sweating profusely—not that the exercise has been particularly strenuous, but our muscles have not unclenched since the simulation began almost an hour ago. In fact, sweat is just one more inescapable physical sensation the play induces. We head out once more, around a corner, down a set of stairs. Our squad leader asks us to take a seat, and on a flat-screen television in front of us we watch green-and-black night-vision footage of desert shot through the windscreen of a humvee. Our squad leader asks us to take stock, the first moment we have had to do so since the act began. Hardly anyone speaks or seems to want to. We have no distance, and even if this is a moment of physical calm, our minds are still spinning and our bodies remain engaged, ready to respond with muscle memory we acquired only an hour or two ago. As the soundtrack begins looping again, we are led down another hall through a curtain, and suddenly, with all the other squads, back into the warehouse where our training had begun.

Intermission

Spilling out into the central warehouse space again, heavy metal music and helicopter sounds are replaced by the jubilant pop/hip-hop of Outkast's 2004 hit, "Hey Ya!" Over the loudspeakers an announcer intones, "Welcome to Kuwait International Airport." Cans of beer are distrib-

uted to the now-veteran audience members, and cigarettes handed out gratis to addicts clamoring for the fix they left in their civilian clothes. As Fox points out, "only the smokers got intermission," because they momentarily leave the building for fresh air and the calm of a small Manhattan street—only a few even stop to wonder if it's okay that they are drinking beer on the sidewalk. This is the first opportunity the play provides to converse with others in our squad beyond the economical commands necessitated by (mock) warfare.

Inside, the "intermission" turns out to be a half-time show. A circle of actors and audience members soon forms at the center of the warehouse, and two women (weren't they in uniforms a moment



Figure 8. An audience member receives a complimentary adult beverage during the intermission at International WOW Company's Surrender. The Ohio Theatre, October 2008. (Photo by Spencer Gordon)

ago?) begin a relatively tame burlesque routine. Actors portraying soldiers begin to emerge as characters beyond their roles as our squad leaders. They become the rowdy soldiers that audience decorum (and the daze of sensory overload) prevents the rest of us from becoming. They hoot and transgress boundaries—telling over-sexed jokes, homophobically teasing one another, receiving lap-dances, and groping the dancers. Carnival has erupted quite unexpectedly in the midst of the battlefield, and we just hope they will keep the beer flowing so we can keep up with the mood.

The crude language of the soldiers can make visitors extremely uncomfortable, while at the same time stirring up an intoxicating joviality. Much like the sentiment of "war is awesome," the distasteful is mixed with an unexpected attraction. And as is apparent during moments of our interview with Fox, the politically incorrect language that pervades the culture of the military

is also hard to throw off once embraced. Its macho rhetoric, for men and women alike, conveys belonging without the need of an actual gun, or even a war.

Within minutes we are instructed to line up in order to begin boarding our plane home, that is, to sit on a set of bleachers in the far side of the theatre. There are almost too many of us, but since there are no chairs, we squeeze together not knowing any better, continuing to touch, but this time with casual postures and tired smiles rather than the focused and pragmatic slapping of thighs in the dark hallways of the second act.

Act 3: Coming Home

Two women dressed as flight attendants stand downstage left and right, walking us through a pre-flight safety demonstration. The soldier/actors scattered on the bleachers among the audience participants and observers remain boisterous, needling each other as our in-flight entertainment begins: on a monitor above the audience an episode of *Friends* plays at deafening volume, allowing the audience to return to the disengagement from reality that can often characterize daily life. One soldier walks far upstage, nearly the distance of the warehouse, and mimes entering a lavatory. He dismantles the smoke detector and pulls a cigarette from his uniform. As he smokes it, he begins to lose his cool. Emotion overcoming him, he lashes out at the toilet and sink.

There is something a bit off about this episode of *Friends*, which now includes images of war dead between the scenes. Another soldier is checking on his friend in the lavatory, and we must be in the air, because the flight attendants have moved on to telling us about the in-flight shopping opportunities. They are certainly chipper, a nice contrast to the nervous breakdown taking place in the lavatory beyond them, and then who is that fellow in the kaffiyeh sneaking downstage? He looks like an insurgent from the simulation. More photographs of the dead and dying, even less *Friends*. The man approaches and stabs one of the flight attendants in the neck. The whole evening has been bloodless until this point, but now thick rivulets of red pour down the flight attendant's side. She continues her presentation, unaware that she is the victim of what appears to be a terrorist attack. Another soldier has noticed—our hallucination is his too, apparently. He raises his gun, yelling at the insurgent, prepared to shoot him. He swirls around erratically, and begins firing, shooting the second flight attendant, who this time reacts, falling to the floor. The sound of gunfire also breaks the scene and the ensemble rushes to the stage for a tautly choreographed dance interlude. Intermixed performances of the celebratory and the demented create a surreal progression of episodic meditations on war and coming home that compose a theatrical play given a typical proscenium staging, and giving the audience participants, at long last, some sense of theatrical distance. One of our squad leaders, shirtless and covered in black paint, addresses us directly, telling us about his experience of returning to the home front—"you wake up, you go home, and dinner's on the table"—and his inability to find peace. Soon cheerleaders (soldiers with pom-poms) have taken his place to teach us chants and acclimate us to the system of "dramatic karaoke" that will be used throughout the rest of the act.

Sanford Wintersberger, a New York-based artist, developed dramatic karaoke by placing a karaoke-style teleprompter in the hands of everyday people and asking them to recite dramatic or poetic texts. His videos of people performing dramatic karaoke explore the participants' experience with the media and highlight how they discover the text as they articulate it. For instance, in his video *Surprise* (2006), the screen is divided in half: on the left half of the screen we see a steady shot on a crowd of people, some uncomfortably fidgeting and looking toward the camera, and on the right is a black rectangle. After a long pause the speakers broadcast, "Surprise!"—and the word appears in readable white type in the right half of the screen. The teleprompting literally surprises the filmed speakers, as they articulate the word and as it surprises the video's audience. As Wintersberger explains of his technique,



Figure 9. Audience members are directed in the use of the play's dramatic karaoke system following intermission in *International WOW Company's Surrender*. *The Ohio Theatre*, October 2008. (Photo by Spencer Gordon)

While doing it, you are no longer responsible for what you say although the tone of your voice might reveal something about you. [...] When doing Dramatic Karaoke you represent only yourself. There is no pressure to be entertaining, cool, logical, interesting, sexy etc. You are reading to yourself as much as to the people around you and the camera. The discovery of the text is shared between you and everyone else. There is no suspension of disbelief. Our focus is on the effect of the medium as much as its message. Its structure is in flux; renewing itself with each rendition. (n.d.)

Fox interweaves this technique with the scripted play the actors enact onstage, using the same monitor that showed *Friends* earlier. The cheerleaders direct us to repeat after them the words that appear on the monitor above them: “cat,” “pig,” “gay,” “awesome,” and so on. The process is not unlike learning phrases during basic combat training; only now the teleprompter acts as a conductor that keeps us even more tightly controlled. Once we prove we are capable of following the prompts, the first of several scenes of reintegration into life on the home front begins.

In each of the scenes, audience members in uniform are called up to play the protagonists. Once onstage, the audience member watches a monitor facing the stage for his or her lines. In one scene, meant to evoke a National Guard awards ceremony, a disinterested soldier calls an audience member up to receive an award. Then another, my own: “Gelsey Bell, come on down.” She rattles off a boiler-plate congratulations before herding me back to the bleachers and settling on one final name, another audience member, who “made the ultimate sacrifice.” No karaoke is necessary for this role. The audience member is instructed to lie on a bench, a flag draped over him, while his family approaches to mourn. A fourth audience member is called upon to deliver a eulogy. The performance is simple and uninflected, and, for this very reason, sounds true and earnest. The dead soldier’s sister begins sobbing over the audience member/corps,

her own words switching from English to Spanish before the scene ends and another dance number serves as a segue.

An audience member is again called to the stage—this repeated ritual is beginning to feel like a horror-film nightmare version of *The Price Is Right*'s “come on down!” A middle-aged woman descends the bleachers and sits in the wheelchair offered to her. From upstage others in wheelchairs approach, each dressed in the furry, over-sized costumes of athletic team mascots: a white tiger, a pig wearing a veil, a shark, and a polar bear. This menagerie helps her into a chip-munk costume before beginning to accost her verbally with the horrors that might follow. She is told that she is about to lose her leg and that her benefits will be denied if she shows any signs of mental illness. An actor places a prop of a severed arm in her lap. The dutiful audience member recites a monologue and her delivery becomes punctuated by real tears that begin to stream down her face. The scene shifts from the individual monologue to an interaction between the mass of seated audience members and the audience member onstage: we administer a psychological exam to our compatriot. To each question she responds in the negative and soon we are able to deliver the happy ending. “You’re fine,” we read, and the shaken spectator returns to her seat.

The next audience member is called to the stage, handed a beer, and directed to sit at the foot of a bed upstage. The man is seated facing the teleprompter, as a topless woman—playing his girlfriend—enters from upstage, out of his line of sight. They talk about their relationship, and his untrained delivery comes off as emotionally distanced, like someone for whom intimacy has become problematic, for whom it has too often in recent memory been associated with the reassuring touch of a colleague before battle or the disquieting sensation of searching a corpse. Their conversation turns toward the positive as the teleprompter gives our soldier the lines his girlfriend has been waiting to hear: “I love you.” “Say it again!” “I love you, I love you.” She becomes giddy as his amorous professions repeat and pile up on one another.



Figure 10. An audience member in desert camouflage fatigues plays a corpse newly returned from the battlefield during the third act of International WOW Company's Surrender. The Ohio Theatre, October 2008. (Photo by Spencer Gordon)



Figure 11. An audience member reads her lines from the dramatic karaoke teleprompter during a scene set in a hospital ward. Outlandish furry costumes indicate her disorientation during the third act of International WOW Company's Surrender. The Ohio Theatre, October 2008. (Photo by Spencer Gordon)

Gradually, half-naked men and women, wearing orange when they wear any clothing at all, with black hoods over their heads, are led by other actors into the space still occupied by the lovers. Actors dressed for other scenes (some in fatigues, one as a flight attendant) form several of them into a human pyramid. A fully naked woman enters downstage left, and sits, reading a novel. Another enters wearing leather bondage gear, and soon the human pyramid speaks to the returned soldier/spectator, who finally notices the nightmare around him. The human pyramid asks about his intimacy issues, about his need to be in control, his interest in sex, violence, and domination. The scene takes on the aspect of a couple's therapy session held at Abu Ghraib—the intertwining of erotics and traumatic violence inhabiting the stage through implied fantasies of sexual role-playing gone awry.

Suddenly it's my name on the teleprompter: "Jim Ball, come on down," the audience members around me are chanting. I am soon sitting across from two professionally dressed individuals. It is a job interview and the stern demeanor of my interlocutors suggests it is not going well. They seem as put off by my scripted answers ("I had problems feeling normal at my last job") as I am by their sneering questions ("Well, you can at least make a spreadsheet, right?"). Soon, my squad leader appears, handing me my rifle, and sending me back into combat. We clear a room far upstage and in a way I am thankful that I get to perform something I have rehearsed. A half-dead insurgent appears downstage, my commanding officer tells me to finish the job and I fire the weapon, this time with full sound effects. The Geneva Conventions had not been part of our training in Act One.

The interview is not over. I read my lines from the teleprompter, describing a dream in which I eat the raw flesh of an animal. One interviewer begins speaking to me in Arabic, though it takes me a moment to realize. The other tells me they have found a job for me—as a butcher. A man in a white coat enters, training me for the job, telling me how to gut a steer using another actor as his demonstration model. An actress enters to tell me about her experiences



Figure 12. A lovers' quarrel degenerates into a nightmarish reenactment of the abuses at Abu Ghraib during the third act of International WOW Company's Surrender. The Ohio Theatre, October 2008. (Photo by Spencer Gordon)

castrating bulls, and to my right and left I realize two others are cooking meat on hot plates and hanging it on a clothesline in front of the audience. The smell has fully permeated the space by the time I return to the bleachers.

Blackout. The monitors light up and we, the audience, begin to speak in unison, a series of first-person statements: “This is what I want, this is where I want to be.” These begin to take on the aspect of a daily affirmation or self-help mantra designed to reground the existentially confused. Every phrase spoken enacts an ambiguous dance in the mouth—the words ricocheting from alien to comforting to repugnant to familiar. It is the last speech we are asked to give.

Jason Christopher Hartley is called to the stage to play himself, without the aid of a teleprompter. He finds himself at his girlfriend’s sister’s wedding rehearsal dinner. He is aloof, suffering from the same inability to connect with this world as each of us called up previously portrayed in our prompted enactments. His girlfriend can see that he is distracted. Her sister tells a story about seeing a car accident and witnessing carnage. He is, of course, unfazed. The mother of the bride begins singing to the guests who are arrayed facing us; their inebriation becomes apparent, but also their joy. There is a sound of rushing wind and the actors tense and lean as though a sudden depressurization is pulling them towards an open window—are we still on the plane?

Finally, the mother of the bride turns to Jason and asks, “What was the war like?”

Act 4: Afterhours

The fourth act sneaks in under the cloak of the show being over. The audience participants put their civilian clothes back on and Fox sells them cheap beer. Most people stick around and chat with each other, easily mingling with cast members and other participants until it is time for the theatre to close. This period is an essential part of the structure of *Surrender*, an alternative to the traditional and notoriously disappointing post-show talk back, though the audience is never informed of it as such. The conversation flows more easily without the pressure of presumptions regarding the relationship between dialogue and political efficacy. As Fox explains of the fourth act, “[T]hat’s where I want the theatre to exist. That’s what should happen. And if we could have been there all night, we would have been.”

Surrender is a piece of theatre that leaves room for multiple experiences, expectations, and insights. Its framework suggests the ways in which meaning resides uniquely in each individual, making it a concretely dialogic experience. Given the rigid scripts of military training and dramatic karaoke, individual agency finds its outlet from within a clearly demarcated set of possibilities. What those possibilities are is just as telling as how people decide to negotiate them. *Surrender* exposes the scaffolding of military order-words, the ritual utterances of eulogies, the official scripts of mental examinations and job interviews, and the intimate dialogue of lovers by placing them within the mouths of the audience. The role of the theatre as a space for contemplation is exponentially enhanced when one shoots, chews, and names the meat of the piece. With the memories of embodied action to spur active reflection internally and in conversation, the proximate participatory drama continues as a kind of haunting. Either when one is placed in a situation that strays far from one’s habitual identity or when a theatrical situation turns out to be disconcertingly familiar, it is impossible to ignore *how* one is performing and then to ask *why*? In our proximity to the lived experience of soldiering, precedent approaches to producing political activity—the incessant questioning that can structure activism—are replaced with insistent questions that belie the gaps that remain. Hartley’s inability to answer the question, “What was the war like?” takes center stage as the very dilemma war has produced. In the final act, all the frustration and/or safety of being told what to do melts away as we reclaim our own voices, postures, and actions in the space of after-show conversation. Rather than falling into the delusion that conversation creates a community to solve all of our problems, *Surrender* forces us to feel intimately the gestures that can produce community in the same gestures that rend it apart.

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Talking with Josh Fox

The following interview with Josh Fox, the artistic director of International WOW Company, was conducted on 9 February 2009 in New York City.

JOSH FOX: I never seem to get away from [war plays]. I think I've done nine or ten different productions about the Iraq War or about post-9/11 "war politics," and things like that—war ethos.

GELSEY BELL: Do you feel like that helped what became *Surrender*? Or does it seem like, "Oh, this is just a theme that keeps coming up with all of the shows?"

FOX: Well, I don't think you can do a play *ever* that doesn't involve the politics of its time. I mean there's no great play that's ever been written that didn't include the politics of its time. There isn't a single one, from the Scottish play to *Death of a Salesman*. That's why we don't have any great plays going on right now. I mean, *Angels in America* was a great play, but for some reason we've extracted the politics out of our art, and that's what is destroying theatre. It's like we just sucked it out, like with a syringe. And then it's in that little syringe in some lab somewhere, the politics of America.

BELL: So would you call your theatre overtly political theatre?

FOX: No, of course not, because that's what I'm trying to say: the definition of a great play—any play that's not a comedy—involves that.

BELL: Why not comedies?

FOX: Well, comedies are not about justice. Comedies are about love. So they're about a totally other thing. The definition of a comedy is that people get married at the end, so you know, that's not part of the thing, the definition of drama, though, has to do with... Well, what is the definition of drama? There's only two kinds of plays right? Comedy and tragedy...

BELL: ...and tragedy ends badly, so probably justice is involved...

FOX: But it's not about "ends badly" with drama. Drama absolutely has to involve the social context or else it's worthless. That's what the theatre is. The theatre exists at the center of the society in order to reflect upon the society that you live in. So therefore, political theatre is a redundancy. Apolitical theatre is a neutered, completely ineffectual piece of nonsense.

BELL: So when you go to plays that feel like apolitical theatre, do you feel like it's still a play?

FOX: No it's not. Fundamentally, it's not. It might be performance art.

BELL: Okay, interesting...

FOX: I find that performance art is also about as interesting and useful as the commercials on the Super Bowl. Wonderfully entertaining sometimes. I think there are moments when performance art elevates to theatre—Taylor Mac, Spalding Gray. I'm of a really traditional mind about this. I believe theatre has rules, and one of the rules is an arc, with a catharsis, and that can be as schizophrenic and crazy and fucked-up as you want it to be, but unless you have that thunderous moment, somewhere, near the end, you didn't do theatre. And I also believe that it has to involve at least the idea of the themes of our era. And that doesn't mean that the classics aren't relevant.

BELL: Because you can translate them into a new context.

FOX: And there are only so many political issues. There's like four: Poverty, War...

BELL: Which are normally connected...

FOX: Well, of course, it's about mankind's struggle for justice. They always used to say there's only three things in drama: Love, God, and Justice, and you only need two out of three, usually.

BELL: So I'm curious how—because *Surrender* is so unique in the sense that there is all the participation stuff, and the way the first and second act are working—how does that work towards what your traditional ideas of theatre are? How does that help you with the arc?

FOX: Well, see this is what's interesting, right? Because the idea of *Surrender*, the model of *Surrender*, is based on the idea that our narrative forms are changing.

BELL: You mean our society's narrative forms?

FOX: Well, our daily diet used to be novels, television, and the movies—all of which are out of your control. They exist in their own universe and you jump into them. I mean you could read the book out of order, if you really wanted to be a serious deconstructionist.

BELL: And some books tell you to do that, but most people don't anyway.

FOX: Essentially what they're doing is exactly what's happening on the internet. Now our daily diet is not that [novels, television, movies] at all. Our daily diet is the internet. We move through it with whatever associative pattern we want. So here's the challenge: because in theatre you have to have that thing at the end, those two forms, or formats, are in conflict with each other.

There's the one kind of narrative arc that starts someplace and ends further away—I always think of it as hitting a homerun: it has to hit the bat and then it has to go on this parabolic arc to somewhere, and once it gets to that somewhere, then you know you're there. You've gone over the left-field wall or whatever. But with the internet, our brains are working now totally differently. When I went home from *Surrender* the first weekend, I was so fidgety and weirded-out and depressed—you know, not to be at the theatre, 'cause you get to be a junky—and I was sitting at home, and I put on a movie on this huge flat-screen TV, completely overwhelmed by it; it was not pleasant at all. I sat there and I was watching this movie and I started to click on my knee. I had no mouse, and I went, "What the fuck?" I wanted to go to the next window. I was bored with the film. I was like, "Go! Different place!" So while *Surrender* still is linear, it takes place over time. It's not this thing where you can walk into any room; it's definitely structured. In the internet society you have to absolutely move people's bodies and brains where you want them to go, forcefully. It has nothing to do with the military, *Surrender*, at all.

BELL: Explain, elaborate.

FOX: I will. This is *TDR*, I can give it all away.

BELL: Oh yeah, please do.

FOX: It has to do with free will. It's about the ultimate sin—or at least the ultimate heinous act—the worst thing you can do is kill another person. It's amazing how quickly all the people in the fucking theatre kill other people, like within an hour and a half. But it's about provoking your free will as much as possible—you have to surrender. Every soldier has to surrender in order to fight, which is also interesting. I have not figured out all the ways in which it is meaningful to have called it *Surrender*, but this was the major thing that I was worried about with Jason when I called him up and told him the idea. I told him the whole idea from the beginning to the end, and then I said, "But the kicker is it's gotta be called *Surrender*." I think I told him some bullshit, because I couldn't figure out why it was called *Surrender*. The genesis of the idea comes from the training with Jason. I was one of the steering committee members of Theatres Against War, and then I got into training with Jason, and you're in there with this squad of nine guys, and you have these rifles and these uniforms, and you operate like a machine. Jason said it's a fascist system to promote democracy. He said, "Here I am going into these rooms in my mind and killing people in my mind, and I was just ready to invade Iran. I was, you know, send me anywhere, I wanna stay with these guys and have this rifle." My background is in Suzuki training. I did Suzuki training for seven fucking years, and I taught it, and it was part of the WOW company's daily diet, you know, and that's military training. That's martial arts. And I played Macbeth three times and I directed it. There is a warrior thing that lives inside of most people—men and women—and when you tap into that, it's primal—primal is a dumb sounding word—but it's in there.

BELL: It's in there. And one of the things I found really interesting about *Surrender* is how you see people enjoying themselves so much.

FOX: That was the whole point. If they didn't have a good time, they weren't going to get it. Because soldiers enjoy it too. What is enjoyment is a whole other magazine in and of itself, or a book by Slavoj Žižek. Or if you read Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*—this German philosopher who wrote about the Freikorps, the band of German soldiers who refused to disband after World War I and continued fighting World War I all the way through the 1920s and '30s, ravaging different towns throughout Europe, and then became the SS in World War II. They finally got their due, you know? These guys had no relationships with their wives. [Theweleit] analyzed their love letters to their wives. He saw *You Belong to Me* in Germany and became a big fan. We had several talks, and I read his book, which was all about these love letters. I've always been interested in fragmentation of personality or in denial—"expense of spirit." I don't know if you've read that play [*The Expense of Spirit* by Josh Fox]; it's about how people deny very difficult information. Soldiers come to tell the owner of a video store that her daughter's been killed in Iraq. She refuses to let them get the announcement out. She pulls a gun from behind the counter on them, locks them in the bathroom and then proceeds to have her Christmas party for an hour and a half, and eventually they come out of the bathroom, and one by one the family all goes into the bathroom and realizes what's going on, but nobody speaks about it. I told Theweleit that I was interested in denial and he said, "No, it's not denial. It's fragmentation." The individual is a poor philosophical subject—a poor carrier of morality. An individual can be a rapist one day, the next day go home to his wife and kids and be nice to them, the next day go burn down a village, the next be a statesman at a dinner. Individuals are too fragmented. The only subject is the community unit, the family. You have to have ties, because you would never be able to do the rape if your wife was watching. You wouldn't be able to pillage the town if the newspaper was there. So your morality or philosophy...

BELL: It's in a web.

FOX: ...is held together in a web, right? So I thought this was interesting. *Surrender* is like building a world where you can't see what you're doing until it's too late. The observers see, but you forget the observers really quickly.

BELL: It was really interesting observing after participating. Very different experience.

FOX: At first we thought, "We don't want any observers. We want everybody participating." Then I realized, "No, no. We can sell more tickets if we have observers." Because the number of tickets was limited by the amount of rifles that we were able to buy, because those shits are expensive. But it's really interesting how you just completely forget the observers, or immediately think the observers are total pussies.

BELL: I was wondering about that. Have the observers ever gotten involved?

FOX: Well there was one time... Morgan Jenness, who was the dramaturg for the project, sat next to a few people who wanted to have a revolt. And of course if they had, I would have told them very politely, "Please, you're interrupting the performance, this is very rude, don't you know how to be a theatre audience, please sit down." No one has tried to overthrow *Surrender*. There was one dude who refused to do push-ups, refused to do anything, and Jason at first got really mad at him. And then basically threw him out, he was like, "you're fucking my shit up dude," and then basically sent him to me. And I pulled him outside.

BELL: (*Laughing*) To the principal's office?

FOX: No. I'm Donald Rumsfeld. I'm the Defense Department. I'm civilian authority. I am Mr. Fox. This is the way the army works. So I took him outside: "What the hell are you doing?" He was like, "Well I wanted to know what would happen to me if I refused," and I was like, "Well, here's what would happen to you. We would lose your paperwork. You'd be on KP duty. The easiest way to get through basic training is to go through basic training. You will be on KP duty for a year, while somebody tries to find your file, so we're gonna sit out here for a little while, and I'm gonna call you an idiot." And I basically was saying, "You're a complete fucking idiot, why did you come to this show? Didn't you know what was going to happen?" He was about 19, very idealistic, and I was in love with this guy, but I was reaming him: "Don't you understand the way the world works? You're going to try to take on this system? What's wrong with you?" *Surrender* was addressing what I felt to be a gap in the activist community. I've been an activist my whole life, and I hate the naiveté or the idealism and the unwillingness. You know people in THAW [Theatres Against War] stopped talking to me? A couple people in THAW thought, "Why are you working with soldiers?" Not all of them, some were more realistic than that, but a few were like, "We don't need soldiers." And I was like, "No, I think you're wrong. I think we would get invaded by Canada if we didn't have soldiers" (*laughing*). When I got involved with Jason what I realized was that from the outside soldiers look like a murderous band of amoral crazy people, but then I got on the inside of the soldiers, all the protesters looked like a bunch of fags. Gay like you wouldn't believe. So unless you can figure out how to get one group of people to think those guys aren't gay, and another group of people to think those people aren't meatheads, or murderers, or worse, you're not going to get anywhere with this.

BELL: So are you trying to make a place of conversation between those two communities?

FOX: Of course, well there has been. We have had two more soldiers sign up and join the cast of *Surrender*. I've always been convinced that there's a very fine line between soldier and actor. These thrill-seeking people. There's a similar kind of lust for life, anger, out of control, and in need of structure. In high school when I was an actor, my drama teacher told me that there were studies of adrenaline levels in people, and the maximum was a soldier going into battle and the next beneath it, just below that, was an actor on opening night. Which I believe. I believe

there's a similar addiction to a certain chemical process inside the brain that unites actors and soldiers.

BELL: What about the audience? Did you make the piece for a specific liberal New York audience?

FOX: There are two different arcs at play in *Surrender* that crossover. One for the soldier crowd—and we did have a fair amount of soldiers and soldiers' relatives and people who never see theatre. The theatre audience, by and large, in New York, rejected *Surrender*. I did not have my WOW company audience come. I had very few other theatre company people come. I think they were scared.

BELL: Why do you think they were scared?

FOX: 'Cause they're pussies.

BELL: Okay. (*Laughter.*)

FOX: Normally, the whole community of theatre comes out and sees each other's work. From Conni's Avant Garde Restaurant to Chuck Mee, to Anne [Bogart] and the SITI company, NTUSA, all of my friends: didn't come. They just didn't come. They just did not want to be there. They wanted...they were scared. Or I don't know why. Or they were like, "Josh is an asshole, we're not doing this." I don't know. But they didn't come out, by and large, and when they did, they got pissed. But there was a whole new audience that got invented. An audience of, I think, younger people that I hadn't reached, that hadn't seen WOW company before. And that created a whole new audience for us. And then there were also a lot of soldiers and family who came through. And so there were two different arcs. The soldiers and their families were not shocked by acts 1 and 2, but were really excited by act 3. And then the theatre crowd that came through were really shocked by acts 1 and 2, and then they got what they expected in act 3. So I think that there was this crossover thing. That was what I intended anyway. I wanted theatre people to get really fucked up by the first parts, and then sort of get what they wanted—*sort of* what they wanted. They still didn't get me saying, "War is bad." Which I wasn't going to say.

BELL: I think some people interpreted it that way.

FOX: We actually said, "War is awesome." I think the extent to which the thing is successful is the extent to which people walk out of it going "War is awesome." As fucked up as that is to say. The fourth act, which we don't tell you is the fourth act, is when I open the bar. People hung out there for at least another hour. It's a four-hour fucking show and people would leave five hours later.

BELL: Because you really want a beer afterwards.

FOX: It's written into the proposal that there's a fourth act. We didn't want to have a formal Q&A, because nobody will stay for that. What we wanted to do was open the bar: beer a dollar, discussion free. That was key, because people didn't leave. We didn't let people know but that's where I want the theatre to exist. That's what should happen. And if we could have been there all night, we would have been.

BELL: So, where did the dramatic karaoke stuff come from?

FOX: My friend Sanford [Wintersberger] had been doing these art experiments where he was doing poems that people would read. He was the brother of my roommate, and so he was messing around with that one night and asked me, "Would you read this thing with me and see if it works?" I don't remember exactly the moment, but it occurred to me "Oh, we have to have the audience playing key roles."

JAMES BALL: So that wasn't there in the beginning, the participation element.

FOX: I can't remember.

BALL: Or was it there for the first and second act and then the third act came in?

FOX: Yes, right, exactly. I had a fairly good idea of how it would work. But what I didn't understand or appreciate was how the production would simply never fail. Actors—no matter how great they are, and they're always great—have their on nights and they have their off nights. And when you have a 35-member ensemble, it's like trying to drive a U-haul around a race-track—if it starts going off, it's very hard to get it back. [For me] every night it has to hit, I drive people crazy with that. I am there every night, I give notes every night. With *Surrender*, it never didn't happen. It always happened and it was always because that first act would fuck you up, the second act, well it was always the second act. There was no way to get through the second act without something happening to you. You couldn't get through it without being affected, being sweaty, the room changing, and then when those songs play at intermission. We don't really give you an intermission. We give out cigarettes. Only the smokers got intermission, because they get to go outside. But still there are about 20 smokers, soldiers, outside in uniform drinking a beer, smoking a cigarette on the street, and they were like, "Why are we allowed to drink beer on the street?" "Because you're in uniform!" And that beer tastes so good, every night. I never drink during a show! But during *Surrender*, I'm drinking three beers before I go in and act, and I run the sound! I gotta be on it. But I want to do the show again. It's really so much fun to do. I think the fun part of it is the whole point. So anyway, *Surrender* never failed, the audience never failed. No matter what they did. All the roles are designed to be read either deadpan, or not. So if they're not, it's better. There were two people who refused to go through all of act 2 and act 3. And they were both guys that were at the theatre in the middle of having fights with their girlfriends. So I thought that was really interesting because when you're having a fight with your girlfriend, you're just not going to take orders from anyone. But beyond that, no one refused. Except for the one guy who had planned to refuse. I lectured him out in the hallway and he was like, "So what would happen to me?" "Well, you'd be stuck in jail. You'd be wearing a dunce cap in the corner. You'd be doing pushups and all this shit." And he says, "So? I won't do pushups, so put me in jail." So I stuck him on the other side from the observers and I would fuck with him. I walk around during the first act, choosing people and doing a whole lot of shit. So I'd walk by and I would give him different things to hold. First I walked by and I gave him a broom. Then I took the broom away and I gave him a piece of machinery: "Fix this. It's broken." And it was this lump of nothing. And he's sitting there holding this metal thing that I had found.

BELL: So he surrendered even more in a way.

FOX: And then! Jason was ready to tear his fuckin' head off in act 1, and then Jason went over and talked to him during act 2, and he came back to me, and was like, "That guy is really cool! He didn't refuse, he was just playing that part. I love that guy." So, you know, score one for peace! For communication, for solving problems. I do not remember that guy's name; I would like to know his name... It was weird because you fell into this mindset. I would fuck with the audience for some reason. People ask me, "Where's the bathroom?" "In that door! Go to the right!" Barking at people for no reason. But it makes life easier. In the ensemble also, it became really easy for the cast to say, "Smith! Police up your shit!" Instead of, "Can you move that please?"

BALL: Could you talk about why you decided to make it participatory?

FOX: Well to be honest, I was applying for a Rockefeller Map Fund and they had given me three Map grants in four years, and I was like, "It can't possibly be my turn again. I have to come up with something that's really crazy. I'm gonna make them an offer they can't refuse." So it challenged me. Basic survival. I survive off of those things and the small amounts of money that they're able to give, which is really not enough to do *Surrender*. But then, money

and commitment are in an inverse ratio. You can pay people to do anything; they don't have to care about it. And that's one of the weird things that in the WOW company we are always trying to figure out. Trying to figure out how to pay people first of all, and then when we do, have them care. Because you know that when you're not paid, everybody cares. Or else they'll leave. And caring is an interesting thing too because you can't care about the bullshit things. If you as the director care about water bottles, everybody's going to start caring about the water bottles. If you care about the war, everybody's going to start caring about the war. You choose what you're upset about. And then if you're upset about the right thing, other people get upset about it to, and then you have shared purpose, which is much better than having a shared equity card, or a shared equity break, or a shared healthcare plan. It's just better to live that way. Which is not saying that you can't have both, although it seems like, in America, you can't have both, at the moment.

BELL: So really the participatory idea was just kind of—

FOX: It was about these grants that I had during the training. And I wanted to see people's frame change as they went through something. I don't know if I got what I envisioned, because I did something else. But the interior event was what I wanted to have happen. To combine the amazing interior script that you have when you're watching a film. You always feel like you're alone when you're watching a film, even if you're with somebody, you're with them—alone. Also what I'm talking about with the internet and how narrative form is changing, you're carving a widescreen thing through space, you know? I even thought I would have act 2 with iPods, so that people were hearing an entirely different soundtrack. I thought of the scene in Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* where the angels are going through the subway train and they hear all the people's thoughts. Isn't that such an amazing scene? So I was thinking initially that act 2 wouldn't be Iraq; act 2 would be all these different places. Like you'd walk into a classroom in El Salvador, you'd walk into a busy street in Bangkok, you'd be on the George Washington Bridge in a huge traffic jam, and the audience would have iPods with their rifles and that they'd be hearing the thoughts of all the people as they walked through. And what I'd forgotten to realize was that in the theatre you hear everybody's thoughts anyway. WOW company taught me [that] when I was directing the first WOW company show, *WOW*, in Thailand, in Thai! I would write in the text and they would translate it into Thai. We had a number system where I had a line in English and a line in Thai, and I could hand the lines, number by number, and then I would forget what-the-fuck number was what. But when they were good actors, it didn't matter, I understood every single thing that they were saying even though I didn't speak the language. This is theatre: your thought onstage is the audience's thought. It's culture also—we grab each other's thoughts from everywhere. In Berlin you have different thoughts than you have in America. In India, within three days you're going to believe in reincarnation. And then when you get to JFK [airport], your future and past lives will die a horrible death and the CNN monitor on the customs line just rips your brain out of what you were in. When you get to New York, of course, what I always say is that you want to kill yourself and get everything done in five minutes. So that's what you believe in New York City. So I didn't need the iPods, all I needed was the Iraqis in the rooms to look at the people. And not overact, not be schmaltsy, not cry, not any of that stuff. This was a break, because Iraqi women never look in the eyes of men, because that means they're flirting with them. Well, not all of Iraqi women are strictly Muslim, and all that kind of thing, but I told the [actors playing the] Iraqis, "Look into their eyes, and something will happen. And then whatever happens happens, and they'll get it, and *you'll* get it! More importantly, you as the actor will go inside that audience member, and there will be a connection. You will get it, and you won't have to act, trust me, you won't have to act."

So *Surrender* was written in the course of the rehearsal period. Jason and I rehearsed basically through Instant Message, at four in the morning. I have all those transcripts, and they're hilarious, I'll send you some of them, I can't send you them all...

BELL: (*Laughing*) Some censored.

FOX: They're redacted... I would go to Jason and say, "Alright, here's what I think about act 3: I think we have a funeral, I think we have a hospital, we have a workplace scenario, we have a fight in a bedroom." The bedroom scene was the first scene that I thought of. (*Clap*) That's where the idea came from. It was that I wanted the audience member onstage with the entire cast naked, in the bed with them. It turned out to be something more, a little different, but that was the genesis of the idea: "How can I get an audience member in bed with a naked actress?" Something about that idea made me really happy.

BELL: Yeah, it's great. The two nights that we saw it, of course, the audience member never turns around to see that she's topless.

FOX: Depends, they sometimes did.

BELL: And were the reactions different?

FOX: Well, the reason why it's staged that way is for Martina's safety—and also for the gotcha thing, the two in one. If the audience member is drunk or unruly or anything like that—but they never have been. I have a typecasting going on: I pick the sweetest looking, nicest looking dude to go into that scene, who's going to be cute or whatever and fun—but there are people waiting offstage to...

BELL: Just in case.

FOX: ...house that guy (*laughs*) you know? But it never was the case. There were times when the guy would just turn around and be [speechless]. And then all the other people come in, the naked prisoners. One guy was like, "I love you, I love you, I love you... And you invited all your friends." You know, that's the funniest moment, the "I love you's."

BELL: How much of that, the second part of that scene, was influenced by making *Memorial Day*?

FOX: Well, I felt that one thing that we had to do was remind people that it was *that* war. And I think up until that moment they lose that idea. So yeah, of course, *Memorial Day* was a big factor there. And also, this is... Freud, this is Eros and Thanatos, this is sex and death. These things are intertwined. The only character in the play that I feel is like me is Stefani's character. That's the only one of them that I wrote myself into. Everybody else was somebody else. I felt like that was the closest to dealing with an intimacy problem that I wanted to think about. And then when I was talking to Jason about his relationship, which broke up during the course of *Surrender*, and he said there was a lot of his thing with couples' therapy written in there too. And so that was a scene. I knew how I wanted to start it. I didn't want it to be about beating up your girlfriend—I knew that people would expect that—I wanted it to be about wanting to be beaten up yourself.

BELL: Yeah, it's much more complicated than that.

FOX: Well I think that's true though, it's more true, I mean I think that's more interesting. That and also role-playing!

BELL: Oh yeah, it's so obvious.

FOX: There were lines in it that were like, "Those aren't your clothes." We had to take them out. Everything that was too on-the-nose had to get taken out, because it just broke the fiction. But she does say, "Do you know what you look like right now?" And he says, "I'm the same as I always was." You know, like, "I didn't sign up for this." Oh yeah you did, this is what you signed up for. I needed the audience to be either in the dilemma, or just do it without thinking about it. And they did it without thinking about it. The night before you saw the show, the dude

shot that guy like 10 times. [The line is:] “He’s not dead, take care of it.” It’s very ambiguous, in terms of an instruction, but every night we’d take the rifle, and shoot the guy, again, which is illegal. It’s a war crime. It’s exactly what happened in that famous video—that’s one of the moments in the Iraq war when everyone realized, “This isn’t going so well”—with the guy who had a dying insurgent on the ground calling for help, and the other guy saying, “he’s not dead,” bang, “now he is.” On video, released around the world, on Al Jazeera, and that guy is in jail, and so here we are, every night, the same thing happens. He’s not dead, take care of it, bang. And one dude was just like bang, bang, bang, bang, and I’m sitting here trying to follow him with the [sound] sampler, and I’m like, “Are you going to stop? Am I going to stop? Who’s leading who right now?” Finally after about nine shots, I’m thinking, “I’m done!” It was really horrific, and then he sits back down and he goes, “Now he is,” and the audience laughs!



Figure 13. Two actors demonstrate the proper way to gut a steer for the benefit of an audience member thrust into the role of a returning soldier towards the end of *International WOW Company's Surrender*. The Ohio Theatre, October 2008. (Photo by Spencer Gordon)

BELL: Every night?

FOX: Yeah, pretty much, 90 percent of the time. And then the best speech, to me, is the “I often dream of sinking my teeth into living cows.” Is that what makes me an animal or is that what makes me human? Human beings have to have milk or meat to get past a certain stage as babies. All I’m saying is, survival: there’s no way around it, you’re going to be killing something. I mean it’s an issue with the fact that we’re animals, whatever, it’s an issue. You can try to get yourself out of it, but you can’t get out of it.

BELL: You have to deal with it.

FOX: Same thing with the war. You can try to get yourself out of it, but you can’t get out of it—at least not at this stage of human consciousness. Native American mythology at least has a philosophy about this, which is that you thank the animal as you kill them.

BELL: Some cultures do, yeah.

FOX: There are all kind of ways to get out of it. Right? That’s what *Surrender’s* about. It’s not about the Iraq War. It’s not about anti-war or pro-war. It’s that human problem, that fundamental philosophical problem, that living equals killing.

BELL: So that being said, did the fact that the run was going on during the election and inauguration influence anything?

FOX: Huge. People came after Obama won. *After*. Before Obama won, we couldn’t get people to come down and see it. This is the thing, the same thing with Iraq war movies I’m sure. You don’t want to see anything you can’t do anything about. There’s this incredible feeling of being totally disempowered by all the Bush years. Although in the theatre—we got interviewed on NPR [National Public Radio] about this—Iraq plays were successful and the films were not. I think that’s because in the theatre you always feel like you are doing something.

BALL: And do you think in your work, in this piece, you’re actually physically doing something?

FOX: Yes, well sure. But even if you're not physically doing something, in the theatre, you're in a room: It's an action; it's not passive. If it's good, there's always this sense of, "We're here with our community sussing something out." You never get that in a film. I mean, sometimes.

BALL: Can you actually talk more about that, about the sense of community? Because to my mind, participating created a very strong sense of community in your little squad, and I'm curious if you thought about that at all.

FOX: Of course. That's the feeling, the camaraderie, that's one of the things I wanted to generate. In an ensemble you have the same thing as you have in the squad. You have this feeling of being with other people, a part of them—something that people don't have. I mean this is stressed in ensemble theatre. But it's not always the case. You can walk into theatre productions and actors don't even know each other, they don't give a fuck, they're complaining about each other. But the thing of being with other people, being tight and having a bond, you know, I think it's really important. I think it's really dangerous. I think it's real, I think it's not real. I mean comradeship, it's not friendship, you know, it's not intimate, you can fool yourself and think it is intimate, but it's not, it's something else.

BELL: Yeah, I saw one of my squad leaders at a party later, I met her through other people, and I was like, "Oh my god! I feel this connection!" But she didn't remember at all, of course, and that whole thing breaks down.

FOX: But that's just because it's a daily thing. Not everybody in the company is my friend, or friends with each other. Some of them are friends, some of them are my friends, but we're still all linked in that other way, you know what I mean? So there's a difference between those things. The difference is that one of them is intimate, and one of them isn't. So in the bedroom scene, the intimacy thing was a part of it, but community, you know, we don't have. The theatre is about this. The theatre is a place where everybody goes to deal with the civilization that they're a part of in very specific terms. We have a problem, whether the problem is humanity—it's always the same problem, the problem is always humanity—whether it's about the war or it's about economics, or *Mother Courage* or the problem of revenge, the problem of being old, the problem of, like in *King Lear*, not knowing how to listen correctly to somebody who is lying to you. Those problems are the ones where we go to the theatre and we try to digest them and figure them out, and you don't figure them out by talking either—although talking afterwards is important—but you figure them out by this osmosis of the mind that's happening around you. *That* changes the world. You can feel it.

BELL: And in *Surrender*, physically, your whole body feels it.

FOX: Yeah, that's what I wanted. I wanted people to be feeling that in their bones.

BELL: I felt sore the next day.

FOX: We never had to fucking worry about if the audience is going to fit on those platforms. No! We'll squeeze 'em in. Are they going to want chairs? Who cares, fuck it, they'll lie on each other. I wanted them all lying on each other by the end of the third act. Touching! Touching in the squad! "Get nut to butt," like get (*clap*) there, that's what I want to see. People like to break those barriers down. One of the reasons why you're able to do this is that you're not wearing your own clothes. The clothes that are different become this other thing, but that's what I wanted to see, people who didn't know each other, right up next to each other. I'm really interested in this phenomenon now, but I'm also interested in the fact that what we did in *Surrender* was not train them to be soldiers, but train them to be trained, so I want to train them to build a building next. The next piece is we're building a sustainable energy building—a theatre—in New York City, one room at a time, one room, each performance. So at the end of it we'll have a new theatre in New York, or wherever we do the show. So the audience will go in, and we'll

teach them something, about carpentry or whatever, I don't know what, we're going to figure this out with an architect. I can't decide if it has to be army corps of engineers, because I think that the discipline part of it has to still be a part of it.

BELL: But it's still going to be sustainable...

FOX: Has to be, absolutely has to be sustainable, has to be able to exist off the grid. And then you leave, and there's a theatre in the room, and you leave it to the people who built it, or there's artist housing or whatever, I don't know what the play's about yet. It's probably about how great it is to be homeless and unmarried. It's called *Reconstruction*. It's the sequel to *Surrender*. [...] About theatre, I feel that, fundamentally, there are rules, and the rules are: you have to deal with the problem of justice, and the problem of your social context, in a room, with a bunch of other people, who also go on that journey with you. It's just fundamental, so when you say political theatre to me, I hate that term. I also hate the term experimental theatre—I like avantgarde actually, it's French.

BELL: Why do you like avantgarde? Just because it's French?

FOX: Because to me it means risk, whereas experimental is somehow pejorative and feels like, "Oh, they're just experimenting." I'm not experimenting; I know exactly what I'm doing. I'm provoking, but I'm not experimenting. I'm not wearing a lab coat, I'm not interested to see what the results are going to be. This is a 10,000-year-old event, this isn't an experiment. Experimental theatre means performance art, which isn't theatre, for the most part. I think theatre is theatre. Or it means something from the '60s—who wants to be doing something from the '60s? Fuck that, you know? I've always been so interested in the audience and so interested in the actor. So now I feel like I've found this thing that works, and I'm going to keep after this for a little while I think. I think I'll have the audience onstage for a really long time. It never fails; something always happens.