

# Dancing at the Frontline: Rosie Kay's 5SOLDIERS De-Realises and Re-Secures the Global War on Terror<sup>i</sup>

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*5SOLDIERS: The Body Is the Frontline* is an award-winning production and the result of a decade's research, networking, and advocacy by Rosie Kay - a British contemporary dancer and choreographer. Between 2010 and the time of writing<sup>ii</sup>, 5SOLDIERS was performed on military bases in the UK, Germany, and Spain<sup>iii</sup>, featured as part of the *Army@Fringe* programme at the 2017 Edinburgh Fringe Festival<sup>iv</sup>, and live-streamed by the BBC.<sup>v</sup> Choreographed by Kay after gaining unprecedented access to the British Army, 5SOLDIERS depicts 'viscerale' and 'disturbing' portrayals of soldiering and war (The Rosie Kay Dance Company 2015). Indeed, through 5SOLDIERS, Kay intends to counteract late-modern, biopolitical warfare's apparent cleanliness and dis-embodiment - its virtuousness and de-realisation in the eyes of the public (Der Derian 2001) - by challenging the sensitivities of a 'disengaged civilian audience' (Kay and Reynolds 2016; Reason 2017). Kay does this by placing soldierised dancer bodies<sup>vi</sup> in extremely close proximity to 5SOLDIERS' audience as particular embodied experiences of war are performed.<sup>vii</sup> However, drawing on participant ethnographies of two 5SOLDIERS' performances and interviews with Kay<sup>viii</sup>, in this short intervention we debate the extent to which 5SOLDIERS succeeds in de-stabilising the de-realisation of the Global War on Terror (GWOt).

Kay's focus on embodied experiences of soldiering resonates with a substantial body of scholarship within the discipline of International Relations (IR) and sub-discipline of Security Studies. Indeed, speaking to contemporary work on bodies, security, war, and embodiment (Shinko 2010; Sylvester

2012; Gregory 2015; McSorley 2013; Ahall 2016; Purnell 2015; Wilcox 2015) and war memory, gender and soldiering, and military disability (Danilova 2015; Higate 2001; Woodward and Winter 2008; Basham 2013; Caso 2016), 5SOLDIERS presents a unique opportunity to explore the potential for the making (in)visible of performative<sup>ix</sup>, embodied, and gendered soldiering to disrupt public feelings about war. However, we argue that Kay's choreographic (re)gendering of military bodies enacted through 5SOLDIERS' cast<sup>x</sup> only partially destabilises the frame of virtuous war. Moreover, performed in three acts (*Drill/Off Duty - On the Ground - Rehabilitation*), we argue that 5SOLDIERS' (in)visibilities work to reestablish late modern warfare's virtuousness. This is done by keeping *Other* bodies and embodied war experiences out of sight and therefore normalising the dominance of aggressive, heterosexual military masculinity over female, queer, Black, Asian and ethnic minority (BAME), and disabled bodies within the British Army. In addition, 5SOLDIERS keeps enemies and civilians hidden and in doing so legitimises the framing of the GWOt as a conflict where 'one learns how to kill but not to take responsibility for it' (Der Derian 2001, xvi). As such, and contrary to Kay's intentions, we contend that performances of 5SOLDIERS work performatively to redouble violence and trauma experienced by Other bodies through erasure. The following discussion explores specific techniques working to these effects in 5SOLDIERS.

### *1 Drill*

*'...Harriet does push-ups then four male soldiers fool around. Why she is doing push-ups when the others are seemingly resting? A good-looking blond soldier corrects the position of her arms and elbows. I feel that his paternalistic instruction implies Harriet's physical incompetence.'* (Danilova fieldnotes 2017).

5SOLDIERS' opening scene establishes a traditional and hierarchical gender order as a male body appears as *naturally* suitable for effective soldiering, while a female body appears in need of

additional training and instruction to become so (Basham 2013). This scene with push-ups leads to the performance of drill wherein the close proximity of 5SOLDIERS' cast quite literally becomes 'touching and moving.'<sup>xi</sup>

*'They're marching back and forth and I can feel them. They're that close.'* (Purnell fieldnotes 2017)

As the dancers march past audience members, their bodies glisten with sweat and cause rhythmic vibrations through the floor, chairs, and bodies in the room. Throughout the scene, Harriet performs military masculinity with skill and conviction - her (re)gendering as masculine symbolising a positive step in gender integration (Basham 2009; King 2013). However, demonstrating 5SOLDIERS' unintended consequences, this scene's performance of female soldiers is at odds with Kay's own imagining of Harriet as a symbol of womanhood - as 'a whore, a prostitute, a mother, a wife, or a Christian Madonna.' (Kay 2017)

## *2 Off Duty*

*'...I can taste the Lynx as the four male soldiers preen themselves ready for a night out. They dance round, flirting with the audience, one makes direct eye contact with me. It's sexually charged, it's fun. Actually, they're having so much fun I feel left out, just sitting there watching...*

*...Harriet's female body is now made visible as, stripped down to only a thin pair of pants and a cotton sports bra, she performs a solo, spreading her legs wide open and she's about a foot away from the front row of the audience. No longer trying to prove her ability to be like a man, alone, in the private space of her dorm room Harriet's femininity becomes visible.'* (Purnell fieldnotes 2017)

Throughout 5SOLDIERS, Harriet's gender is performed as unstable. For example, having been masculinised by drill and soldiering, *off duty* Harriet remains the object of heterosexual masculine desire. Indeed, in this scene, the very presence of the almost naked female body is central to the normalisation of heterosexual hyper-masculinity (Higate 2001; Barrett 2001). Moreover, desire for Harriet's body legitimates the sexualised fantasies of heterosexual soldiers - introducing them as an indispensable, 'human', component of soldiering, and 'letting off steam' in the army (Basham 2016) while Othering feminine bodies, queer soldiers, and subordinate masculinities. Such Othering is also critical towards 5SOLDIERS' making of British Army conduct in the GWoT as virtuous. For example, there is a quick transition from a scene of Harriet's aggressive sexual pursuit by male soldiers to a scene of admiration, wherein Harriet is lifted up into the air by the male dancers - *held up* - as a 'beautiful soul' and symbol of the body of the nation to be protected by 'just warriors' (Elshtain 1995).

### 3 War

*'...Can I feel the wind caused by the Chinook's rotors? I think so but I'm not sure, maybe it's been breezy all along and I've just noticed'* (Purnell fieldnotes 2017).

*'... Soldiers join hands in a parachute jump, and suddenly, the sounds of helicopter wings disappear being replaced by an oration. I don't know the origin of this music but I recognise its religious undertone.<sup>xii</sup> A beautiful female voice encourages reflection, sadness and compassion. It sacralises soldiering. It sacralises war.'* (Danilova fieldnotes 2017).

In this penultimate sequence, war is introduced as an affective message which encourages the audience to sympathize with soldiers who presumably risk their bodies for them. War is also communicated as a morally justified, virtuous act legitimating the very existence of the frontline in

the GWoT. Prior to this scene (in 'Drill') the audience hear a radio broadcast about a successful operation in Iraq while in 'Off Duty' they glimpse the war trauma caused by the process of moulding male and female bodies into effective human weapons. However, this helicopter scene is crucial towards 5SOLDIERS' ascription of moral meaning to the GWoT as through its musical accompaniment (with *Sabat Mater*) contemporary British soldiering is sacrilised. Such sacrilisation is further sedimented throughout 5SOLDIERS by the implicit hierarchy of bodies on the frontline. This encourages compassion for the visible bodies of White, Christian, Western soldiers at the expense of non-Western, non-White, non-Christian bodies of Others who remain unseen and ungriveable (Butler 2004).

#### *4 Rehabilitation*

*'...They strap his lower legs to his thighs. I look around and notice that some audience members have covered their mouths. They're shocked. I'm really not.'* (Purnell fieldnotes 2017)

Depicting one soldier's injury and rehabilitation, 5SOLDIERS' final sequence partially challenges the GWoT's de-realisation by bringing a soldier's injured body - previously 'taboo on so many levels' (Kay 2017) - to the very fore of its audience's attention and working to disrupt their sensitivities. As Kay reflects in her interview, 5SOLDIERS' civilian audience are the 'lefty artsy audience, who are Guardian-reading and take a particular [critical] stance on the recent wars' (Kay 2017). As noted above, we observed that many in the audience appeared to be moved by the performance of military injury and disability. However, we argue that this disruption of sensitivities does not necessarily undermine the frame of a de-realised GWoT. Rather, by performing a successful rehabilitation wherein the *injured* dancer learns to walk on his stumps, do push-ups, dance (under the accompaniment of Pergolesi's choral), and march before saluting the audience,

5SOLDIERS re-militarises disabled masculinity (Caso 2016) while further de-realising the GWoT by (in)visibilising injured but un-rehabilitated and dead soldiers killed in action.

*Conclusion: Seduced by a virtuous war*

Kay's motivation for 5SOLDIERS comes from being brought up in a family whose 'identity is shaped by war' while Kay (2017) is fascinated by soldiering as a professional act of (re)embodiment similar to dancing (i.e. 'I just want an opportunity to go in and feel what it feels like to be a soldier'). Through the depiction of particular embodied experiences of soldiers in the British infantry, Kay wanted to challenge 5SOLDIERS' audience's sensitivities relating to soldiering, military disability, and a de-realised GWoT. As she comments:

*'... we all know that war is bad... but also there's a truth in that soldiers really really enjoy soldiering and enjoy properly doing their job, i.e. going out and shooting people, blowing things up, rather than peacekeeping' (ibid).*

In some ways, Kay succeeds in challenging the audience's sensitivities of soldiering - by showing sexual harassment and soldier injury. However, at the same time, we argue that 5SOLDIERS has effectively normalised and re-secured the hierarchy of bodies in the British Army and on the frontline and further de-realised the GWoT. Indeed, with each performance of 5SOLDIERS, Kay forces a looking glass up to the face of Britain's 'modernising army' (Kay 2017) which is comprised of heterosexual, masculinised bodies. Off duty, bantering lads may lust after their female counterparts but ultimately respect that *no means no*. 5SOLDIERS also performs a British Army wherein wounded soldiers are rehabilitated successfully and learn to walk happily on their stumps. What 5SOLDIERS' makes visible is therefore an infantry free from rape and PTSD where the worst affliction suffered by a *squaddie* is boredom. Kay has therefore worked as both choreographer and

make-up artist to the British Army - concealing blemishes, inflating ego, and allowing the continual denial of a less attractive face. Moreover, Other (Non-Western, non-Christian, non-White) bodies remain firmly outside of 5SOLDIERS' frame meaning 'sympathy with soldiers does not extend to the recognition of the embodiment and losses from the enemy side' (Der Derian 2001, xivi). Having performed soldiering as a hyper-masculine profession and an avenue for violence enjoyed by heterosexual males, 5SOLDIERS re-secures the frame of a virtuous GWoT and limits rather than widens the space for critical discussion of the purposes, implications and ethical responsibilities associated with soldiering in its name. Questions therefore remain as to how, where, and by what means it may become possible to create space for critical engagement with the contemporary British Army and its practices where the embodied war experiences of such Others may be seen and taken into account as well.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> This paper is part of the wider research project, 'War Commemoration, Military Culture and Identity Politics in Scotland' funded by the Carnegie Trust for the Universities in Scotland, 2017-18 (RG13890/70560).

<sup>ii</sup> October - November 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> 5SOLDIERS has been commissioned to tour the US in 2017-2018.

<sup>iv</sup> 5SOLDIERS was live streamed on 08/09/2017 and made available to view online until 14/10/2017.

<sup>v</sup> During the Fringe Festival 5SOLDIERS was shown at the Hepburn House Army Reserve Centre which hosted the 5SOLDIERS cast for the duration of their stay in Edinburgh.

<sup>vi</sup> The 5SOLDIERS' cast trained alongside British Army Infantry Regiments.

<sup>vii</sup> 5SOLDIERS is not performed on a stage or raised platform but at audience level. The square performance area is surrounded by rows of chairs (upon which the 5SOLDIERS audience are seated).

<sup>viii</sup> Research towards this piece involved participant ethnographies at 5SOLDIERS performances in Edinburgh (26/08/17) and Aldershot (22/09/17) and two interviews conducted by Kandida Purnell on September 22<sup>nd</sup> (in person) and October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2017 (Skype).

<sup>ix</sup> We follow Judith Butler (1993: 1) to understand performativity as 'the reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomenon that it regulates and constrains.'

<sup>x</sup> Four male dancers and one female dancer - all of whom are white and able-bodied.

<sup>xi</sup> As Sara Ahmed (2004) has explained, affect/emotion may be manipulated and intensified in the atmosphere in between bodies to the point that it makes material impressions upon (touches) and moves bodies closer together or further apart from other bodies and things.

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<sup>xii</sup> Kay refers to V Quis est Homos (helicopter dance) of *Stabat Mater* composed by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi in 1736 and performed by Andreas Scholl, Barbara Bonney, Christophe Rousset & Les Talens Lyrique, 1999, DECCA. Two other parts of the same *Stabat Mater*, I Stabat mater, and XII Quando Corpus are used as background music for the love duet during ‘Off Duty’ and the injury scene (Kay 2017).

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