



NOMA

WAR WOUNDS

It seems a long way from battlefield to barre. Prompted by Noma's concern, Sally Howard



meets artists who use dance to confront the brutal experience of war.

Illustration by Bex Glendining
for *Dance Gazette*

On 27 May, 2011 Cassidy Little's Royal Marine unit was charged with a routine manoeuvre: storming an Afghanistan insurgent stronghold to create a diversion that would force the town's occupiers out into the open. The weather was bright and sunlight gilded the distant mountain tops of the Hindu Kush as Little and his unit inched towards the town's southern perimeter. Marine Sam Alexander died the instant he stepped on the improvised explosive device, as did Lieutenant Ollie Augustin and the unit's Afghani interpreter, Ali. Little lost much of his right leg, fractured his pelvis and sustained spine and head injuries in the detonation of the long-buried IED, the blast reverberating across the town's mud-brick rooftops. The Canadian-born 37-year-old remembers little of the hours that followed, apart from his words to an army medic as he was airlifted to Camp Bastion. 'I remember very clearly that I said "shit, there go my dancing days,"' Little says.

In fact the opposite was true. Little had previously taken a dance major at Lindenwood University in Missouri, but a meniscus tear ended his hopes of a professional career. He moved to the UK in 2004 and, after a short stint as a stand-up comic, joined the Royal Marines at the age of 23. Two months into Little's recovery from his injuries in Afghanistan, at Headley Court Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre in Surrey, playwright Owen Sheers and theatre director Stephen Rayne visited. Their play *The Two Worlds of Charlie F* was designed to form part of the participants' recovery, documenting the events that led to their injuries as well as their lived experience of war. It was also intended as an antidote to bravura cinematic depictions of war: letters sent home to tearful wives, slow motion scenes of infantry rising from the trenches.

'I FELT HUMILIATED TO DANCE IN THE WHEELCHAIR, BUT IT WAS A MILESTONE IN MY RECOVERY'

CASSIDY LITTLE

For many reviewers, the most moving moment in the 2012 production, performed at the Theatre Royal Haymarket in London before touring the UK, was a scene in which Little and two fellow wounded veterans perform a synchronised dance in wheelchairs, picked out in an eerie glow reminiscent of a military searchlight. 'Honestly? I felt humiliated when I was asked to dance in the wheelchair,' Little recalls. 'But in the end it was a milestone in my recovery. It made me reconnect with the experience of dance with the body I was in; not the body I'd had before.'

Kenneth MacMillan's *Gloria* was a modern watershed in the representation of war in dance. The 1980 ballet explores the human costs of World War I, a conflict which had permanently disabled MacMillan's father, drawing on *Testament of Youth*, Vera Brittain's memoir of serving as a nurse at the front. In MacMillan's staging, the Royal Ballet's dancers wore outfits designed to resemble torn flesh and ripped uniforms. This was a relatively rare attempt to engage with the emotional impact of warfare – and the military equally looks askance at dance. As Little admits, 'dancing is often seen as an affront to marines' macho image.'

Happily, such perceptions are shifting. Thanks to a new understanding of the therapeutic possibilities of non-verbal expression for the treatment of war trauma, as well as a wave of dance productions about war and soldiering bodies, the conceptual divisions between the human body in dance and at war are breaking down; with profound and often moving results.

5 Soldiers: The Body is the Frontline, is a landmark contemporary piece that was inspired by choreographer Rosie Kay's 2008 training with 4th Battalion the Rifles and her later interviews at Headley Court. There she met wounded service personnel she had first encountered when they were training on Dartmoor for deployment to Iraq. The resulting piece gets across, with painful immediacy, the vulnerability of the soldiering body. Kay's soldier-dancers, all of whom are veterans, are tormented



by prickly heat and insects and cowed by the terrors of midnight patrol as much as they act out the peacocking posturings of macho militarism; a female recruit, meanwhile, struggles with her womanly otherness within the military machine.

Kay explains that her aim with *5 Soldiers*, which was first staged in London in 2010 and will tour in an expanded version this year, was to convey the ‘embodied’ nature of war. ‘War has always been about the maiming, harming and killing of individual bodies, and remains so; even in this age of drones and computerised war,’ she says. ‘Dance is the perfect medium to explore this. Through dance an audience can read, and empathetically feel, the dancer-soldiers’ bodily reaction to the privations of war.’ As contemporary dance pioneer Ruth St Denis once said: ‘I see dance being used... to express what is too deep to find for words.’

There are echoes of Cassidy Little’s trajectory in the path that brought Marine veteran Roman Baca, 45, back to professional dance. Born in New Mexico, Baca trained as a ballet dancer at Connecticut’s Nutmeg Conservatory but became disillusioned by the slog of getting by as a jobbing dancer. Baca also felt an unsatisfied urge to do social good. ‘Back then, I thought that there was no way I could give something back through dance,’ he says. ‘You know, putting on tights, getting on stage: it all seemed so frivolous somehow.’

In 2000 Baca enlisted as a US marine and in 2005 was deployed as a machine-gunner to Fallujah in western Iraq, arriving in the aftermath of the bloodiest period of combat in the US–Iraqi offensive. Baca and his unit were charged with patrolling for insurgents and making the first efforts to rebuild relationships with locals in villages ransacked by war.

‘War had had this brutalising effect, both on the locals and the fighters,’ Baca recalls. ‘There was prevailing distrust of Americans; and aggression and violence, against us and perpetrated by us, these supposed peacekeepers, was common.’ When Baca left active combat and returned to the US in 2007, these experiences haunted him: he struggled with flashing anger and depression. ‘I’d done this life-changing thing of participating in war and naively thought I could come home and move



'VETERANS GET STUCK IN THE TRAUMA OF WAR. DANCE HELPS TO MAKE THEM UNSTUCK'

ROMAN BACA

Painful immediacy... Rosie Kay's *5 Soldiers* and (right) Roman Baca in Fallujah Photos: Brian Slater; courtesy of Roman Baca



on into sensible adult life,' he says. It was Baca's now-wife Lisa Fitzgerald, a ballet dancer, who first suggested he use dance to work through his trauma: 'I wasn't convinced at first,' Baca admits. 'But I'm happy to admit, a decade down the line, she was right.'

Later that year Baca and Fitzgerald established Exitr2 Dance Company and in 2009 they produced *Habibi Hhaloua*, an experimental ballet that explores the tedium and chronic dread that Baca experienced as a patrolling marine. In a moving moment, he sags under the weight of a wounded colleague in fatigues who's draped across his soldiers as dancers slump, moribund at his feet. 'Everything from news reports to Hollywood movies picks out the most dramatic and fantastical war stories,' Baca explains. 'But my profoundest experiences were of the tiny ripple effects of war: the mother who came up to our post in tears because she was worried about getting shot if she drove home in the dark, the utter physical boredom of all those hours of waiting, waiting.'

In 2012 Baca returned to Iraq with New York's Battery Dance, a company that runs overseas development projects using the medium of performance art. Initially locals in the small village in northern Iraq were distrustful when they heard that Baca had served in their country as a US marine. 'Everyone knows what the word 'Fallujah' is shorthand for,' he says. The dance piece that came from the project, *Yarjuun*, was choreographed in collaboration with a 20-strong group of local youth, exploring the traumas of war. On the day of its performance, on a piece of lino Baca had bought from the local market and taped down to spare dancer's feet from the raw-wood stage, the whole village turned up bearing armfuls of flowers as a symbol of peace.

Baca's latest piece is a reworking of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* inspired by the lived experience of soldiers in World War I. He also leads dance projects with veterans across the US. 'Veterans get stuck in the trauma and experience of war,' Baca says. 'Movement and collaborative choreography help to make them unstuck so they can move forward with their lives.'

There's a growing body of science behind Baca's faith in dance as therapy for the traumas borne of war. The US's Walter Reed National Military Medical Center has used dance in the treatment of traumatised veterans since 2015; and a form of non-verbal intervention called dance/movement therapy has been shown, in studies by the War Trauma Foundation and Brigham Young University, to be successful in treating post-traumatic stress disorder in veterans, asylum seekers and refugees.

In the UK, Soldiers' Arts Academy, a charity founded to promote arts within the military, has supported a number of dance pieces designed as participant therapy. They include 2016's *Traces of War*, a site-specific piece for Somerset House in which disabled and able-bodied artists from dance company Candoco performed choreography inspired by the flight path of aerial drones, alongside ex-servicemen and women. 'There was a beautiful moment when the audience looked down from a stairwell to four or five women dressed in red, their bodies unbudding like a Remembrance poppy,' says Ellie Douglas-Allan, a senior producer at Candoco.

The coming year promises more in the way of these fruitful and unlikely collaborations. *Exit 12: Moved by War*, a documentary of Baca's work by San Francisco-based studio Even/Odd, is a surprise contender in the upcoming Academy Awards. Cassidy Little stars in *Soldier On*, created in collaboration with Soldiers' Arts Academy about a group of soldiers who decide to stage a play, and is slated for an off-Broadway reboot. *Army @ the Fringe*, a space for works about military life, staffed by Scots military, will return for its fourth year at the Edinburgh Fringe in August.

If we're seeing a sea change in dance's willingness to explore the brutal and humdrum realities of conflict, to what extent are these attitudes rippling through to the macho world of the barracks? Rosie Kay (who says that her attention to 'field craft' won her respect from the military), recounts the response of a 'terrifying rough and tough' Scots sergeant called Dibby to *5 Soldiers'* 2012 tour of British military barracks. 'When he saw us he said 'a bloody dance troupe at the barracks? Is it Monty Python week?' Kay says. 'But Dibby was in tears at our portrayal of the squaddie's life, in all of its joy and pain. These days he's one of our biggest cheerleaders.'

