



# The Guide

## A Theatergoer's Resource

Edited by Taylor Wallau with the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

### *The Body of an American*

A World Premiere by Dan O'Brien  
 Inspired in part by the book *Where War Lives* by Paul Watson  
 Directed by Bill Rauch

## A Table of Contents

Who is Dan O' Brien? ..... 2

Writing About Myself, an Introduction ..... 2

The Shot ..... 4

Famous War Photographs ..... 5

The Evolution of Art in War ..... 7

PTSD Past, Present, & Future ..... 7

Discussion Questions ..... 9

Local Connections ..... 9

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# Who is Dan O’ Brien?

Dan O’Brien’s plays include *The Cherry Sisters Revisited* (Actors Theatre of Louisville’s Humana Festival), *The Dear Boy* (Second Stage Theatre), *The Voyage of the Carcass* (SoHo Playhouse; Page 73 Productions), *Moving Picture* (Williamstown Theatre Festival), *The House in Hydesville* (Geva Theatre Center), *Key West* (Geva), *Am Lit* (Ensemble Studio Theatre), and *Lamarck* (Perishable Theatre), as well as the new play *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*, which will premier in 2012 at Black Dahlia Theatre in Los Angeles, directed by Michael John Garcés. O’Brien has received commissions from Manhattan Theatre Club, Williamstown Theatre Festival, Ensemble Studio Theatre Sloan / First Light Grant, Geva Theatre Center, The Playwrights’ Center’s McKnight National Residency and Commission, and residencies and fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation’s Bellagio Center, Sundance Theatre Institute, Theatre Communications Group, O’Neill National Playwrights Conference, New Harmony Project, Yaddo, Princeton University (Hodder Fellowship), The University of the South (Sewanee), University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the Thomas J. Watson Foundation. Awards include the American Theatre Critics Association’s Osborn Award for an emerging playwright. O’Brien is also a poet. His song



cycle *Theotokia (Hymn to the Mother of God)*, with composer Jonathan Berger, recently premiered at the Spoleto Festival USA, performed by Dawn Upshaw. 📌

## Writing About Myself

by  
Dan O’Brien

I suppose all I can do is write about myself. Whether it’s a play about history, which is a story, after all; or a play that comes from nowhere at all, comes from Me, who is also a story. Roughly half the plays I’ve written might be called historical. The other half tend to take place in the real world, now. There isn’t any good reason for this split that I’m aware of. And strangely they often seem to come in pairs, written at the same time, the historical during the day, the imagined one at night.

But here’s where that dichotomy starts to break down. I like my historical stories with lots of mystery, lots to make up. And the historical play often seems to let me off the hook of naturalism, to allow for, if not demand, a wilder language and theatricality, or at least the naturalism of another time and place, which is itself a kind of style. While the fictional play often ends up realer, more naturalistic, hiding its thorniness in the subtext and, curiously, often tending towards the confessional. (These tend to be my memory plays, or recent-memory plays.) Often I feel like I’m approaching the same story over and over again, but from alternating sides of the mountain.

What I’m finding lately, however, is that the most rewarding stories—rewarding to me, in their composition, which is all I can control, really—come not from history, at least not from history in a book, and not from the private shadow theatre of my own psychology either, but from the lives of other people. Asking someone who’s actually living right now, whose life is far removed from my own, to trust me with their story, and then to take on their language, to examine and adapt and embellish where necessary to make it more truthful—this approach seems to be uniting my warring impulses. The purely fictional has begun to seem somewhat selfish for me, almost vain.

I credit my friendship and collaboration with reporter Paul Watson with this latest development in my playwriting. Paul has spent his career searching for true stories of the most horrific nature, in places like Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda, Iraq, Afghanistan. It’s this engagement with the world—some would say over-engagement—that initially drew me to him. Sometimes he describes his motivations as selfish, that he was a war reporter, at least when he was younger, because



photo: patrick weishampel.

he was trying to prove something to himself and to the world (a motivation that reminds me very much of my own beginning as an artist). Now in his mid-fifties and managing some significant post-traumatic stress disorder, Paul doesn't have any illusions that his work will change the course of history—at least not for the better. He believes that his Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of a dead American soldier being torn apart by an angry mob in the streets of Mogadishu in 1993, for example, merely emboldened a nascent al-Qaeda, and he draws a quick and violent line from Somalia to the attacks of September 11th, and on to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Today Paul talks of his work in more sober, cynical, and yet somehow more noble terms, as simply his vocation, something that pays his bills and gives him some small measure of satisfaction from time to time when he's able to cast some light on cruelty and suffering.

While Paul was taking his famous picture of Staff Sgt. William David Cleveland in Mogadishu he claims he heard the voice of the dead soldier say to him: "If you do this, I will own you forever." Paul interpreted this as a threat of retribution, but over the course of writing this play I've come to understand it as a call to action, a reminder that we all must bear responsibility—must bear witness—to the lives and stories of others. Over the course of several years Paul trusted me, without much reason to—sending me recordings of his therapy sessions, for example, and one particularly wrenching recording of his phone call with the brother of Sgt. Cleveland—and his trust required me to give something of myself in return. For me, the real story of

this play is about trust, about witnessing each other's stories. I don't know if I fully understand it yet, this idea that collaboration brings us closer to the truth than anything any of us can hope to convey alone. But there's something profound in that, and profoundly of the theatre: that perhaps we can best express ourselves when doing our best to tell someone else's story.

While Paul may no longer believe that his work will change the world, I still believe it might; at least the way art changes things—in small ways, often in secret. As I've gotten to know him better, and after spending a short time with him in the Canadian Arctic this past winter while he was interviewing local artists on a variety of topics—from their careers, to global warming, to racism—what I find most impressive is Paul's ability to garner trust, to elicit stories, and then to retell that story for his audience. It's this patience, compassion, and disciplined empathy that I'm hoping to emulate in my plays now.

My new focus—what should I call it? docudrama? recent-history play? transmigrated autobiography?—could mean I'll be writing more socially-engaged plays, whatever that means exactly. More political theatre. And it's true that I'm researching a play with Paul about an English school in Kabul where the children of the Taliban in the '90s were educated, and where Talib chieftains would meet to discuss and debate their future as the U.S. invasion loomed in 2001. This play will require me to spend some time with Paul in Kabul, which is a somewhat daunting prospect, to say the least, for a playwright and part-time poet living twenty blocks from the beach in Santa Monica. I suspect

that this play when it gets written will strike many as political. For my part I can't shake the Yeatsian notion that argument with others is rhetoric, while argument with oneself is art. What I'm most interested in is the particular, peculiar, personal story, and if others want to call it political then that will be just fine with me.

In the meantime the play I'm writing—right now, as we speak, or this morning at least—might strike some as a backwards step. And maybe it is. It's unabashedly a memoir, and since I'm from a pretty middle-class, psychologically fraught background the story in the end will most likely be anything but “political,” at least in the popular sense. But I'm trying to learn from Paul's example as I investigate the mystery of several family secrets, as I endeavor to trust that the real people, the real story, will be infinitely more meaningful than another fiction—or history play—wherein my personal demons are put through their theatrical paces. I've already tracked down several estranged relatives and asked them about some of these secrets, and some secrets have been dispelled or at least addressed easily

with stories about their pasts (and mine) that may or may not be true, may be delusional or lies or simply too subjective to stand much scrutiny. The process itself is frightening and dangerous (almost as frightening and dangerous as a trip to Kabul, perhaps). But I have to trust that I can reach these people, literally and figuratively, that there exists a solution to the mystery I'm trying to solve, and if not a solution then at least the story of my striving will be worth listening to.

Of course, in many ways I'm still writing about myself. These people, their stories, are my concern, my enthusiasms. And I believe that the best writers must risk something profound of themselves in the writing, no matter what. So maybe I'm still writing the same story after all, but maybe I'm finding a better way to do it. 🏠

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*I do want to hear this because you're another person in this story. Um, and each, each person in this story ends up telling his own story of what I call—the working title for the book I'm writing is *Where War Lives*. From a quote of Albert Camus when he was keeping his notebooks pre-World War Two. And a friend wrote to him saying, you know, I'm grappling with this philosophical question, Where does this vile thing, war, live? And Camus said, he's in Algiers at the time and he says, I look at the bright blue sky and I think of the guilt that I feel from not being in a position where I, I can die with them, while at the same time wanting to be as far away as I can from it.*

—Paul Watson, in conversation with Dr. Joseph LeDoux, January 2006

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# Famous War Photos

## FLAG GOES UP IN IWOJIMA

**Joe Rosenthal**



*Flag raising on Mount Suribachi following a bloody four-day battle in Iwo Jima in 1945.*

The flag depicted in the picture was actually the second raised for the occasion-- the first was too small for other Marines on the island to see. The original picture was cropped to the size of this photo, the version that eventually topped newspaper and magazine covers around the world to become the most reproduced image of all time.

## THE BOMB IS UNLEASHED

**The National Archives**



*A column of smoke rises 60,000 feet into the air over Nagasaki, marking the impact of the second atomic bombing of Japan during World War II.*

The atomic bomb, which was first dropped over a populated area days earlier at Hiroshima, carried the explosive power of

21,000 tons of TNT. Codenamed "Fat Man," the plutonium-based bomb flattened three city miles and killed an estimated 70,000 people after being dropped by a U.S. B-29 bomber on August 9, 1945. President Harry Truman remarked, "It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful..."

## SADDAM COMES DOWN

**Associated Press**



*With the help of a U.S. tank, Iraqi citizens pull down a statue of Saddam Hussein as American troops stream into Baghdad in April 2003.*

Iraqis overcome with the liberation of the country's capital pulled down the Saddam centerpiece in defiance of the former leader. After the statue fell, Iraqis celebrated by dragging it through the streets.

## SURVIVING THE BLEACH

**Andrei Freidmann**



*Troops crawl to the beach amid whizzing bullets and artillery fire during the first wave of attacks on D-Day.*

Photographer Andrei Freidmann, famously known by his working name Robert Capa, was one the

greatest contributors of World War II imagery. His picture of the D-Day invasion is one of 11 remaining pictures captured from the historic battle-- four film rolls were destroyed after a darkroom employee overheated the negatives in the drying cabinet. Life magazine published the photos anyway, telling readers that the surviving images were out of focus. v

## JAPAN ATTACKS

**National Archives**



*The USS Arizona burns after Japanese bombers attack Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 during the first attack against the United States in World War II.*

The carefully planned attack, which was intended to minimize the U.S. Navy's presence in the Pacific, left thousands dead, and thrust the United States into World War II.

## RESPECTING THE FALLEN

**Tami Silicio**



*Flag-draped coffins of dead soldiers are loaded onto military aircraft for transportation back to their families in the United States in April of 2004.*

Tami Silicio, a former cargo worker in Iraq, shot the picture to show

the respect given to American soldiers. The picture, which hit the front pages of newspapers days later, got her and her husband fired from their jobs— the result of a Pentagon policy that restricts publishing photographs or footage of military coffins.

In 2005, the Senate voted to uphold restrictions limiting photographs of military dead, making Silicio's picture one of the most notable images of the Iraqi conflict.

## D-DAY

### U.S. Library of Congress



*Soon-to-be president, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, orders paratroopers, "Full victory, nothing else," as they prepare to board airplanes before the first D-Day assault along the coast of France on June 6, 1944.*

The D-Day assault was the largest in history, requiring the coordination of 5,000 ships, 11,000 airplanes and more than 150,000 troops. The Allied Forces suffered 10,000 casualties breaching Germany's defenses-- one of the costliest battles of World War II.

## WARSAW GHETTO



*German storm troopers force Jews in the Warsaw, Poland ghetto from their homes during their relocation to extermination camps.*

Between 1941 and 1943 Jews across Europe formed underground resistance groups aimed at weakening German control in Jewish ghettos. Warsaw Jews mounted the most famous resistance effort in 1943, holding back German forces with homemade weapons and smuggled artillery for more than a month before being arrested.

Of the 56,000 Jews captured after the collapse of the resistance, 7,000 were put to death, and the remainder transported to death camps scattered across Europe. The picture, taken shortly after the fall of the Jewish resistance, was used as evidence to help convict German officers in the Nuremberg Trials.

## AMERICA IN THE PACIFIC

### National Archives



*Famed general Douglas MacArthur, leader of the American military campaign in the Pacific, wades ashore during the landing in the Philippines in October of 1944, as liberation forces swarm the beach.*

MacArthur returned to the Philippines in 1944, three years after suffering a brutal defeat to Japanese troops. He made good his promise to return when U.S. forces regained control of the capital in 1945.

## CIVIL WAR

### Matthew Brady



*President Lincoln stands proudly with Union troops following the Battle of Antietam in September 1862, in which 26,000 soldiers were killed or wounded.*

The battle, one of the most influential of the war, marked the turning point for Union forces as Confederate general Robert E. Lee was forced to retreat to Virginia. Famed Civil War photographer Matthew Brady, who is often credited as the first photojournalist for his work during the war, photographed many of Lincoln's most well-known and enduring images.

*Channel One News*

[channelone.com/news/war\\_photos/](http://channelone.com/news/war_photos/)

# The Evolution of Art in War

Long before the invention of photography, artists were reacting to the plights of their times, either through documentation or an expression of discontent. Francisco de Goya, for instance, painted horrific scenes of bloody battles in an effort to portray the true consequences of war, and the pain suffered by his people. He was one of the first artists to actually illustrate these acts of violence in his paintings, as opposed to just the aftermath of the battles. Some of his more shocking works include *The Third of May 1808*, and a collection of prints entitled *The Disasters of War*. Goya is just one example of an artist that has been affected by war, but many others have struggled with the social repercussions of their country's national security and foreign involvement. Although they are not necessarily in a position of political power, artists are able to approach these issues from a human level, and therefore they have the ability to influence the masses.

Once the power of the photograph became available, the secret horrors of war were no longer at the mercy of artistic interpretation. In America, images from the front of the Civil War did not stay in the memories of the soldiers; they were printed and exhibited in museums for the public to witness. Indeed, every war after the Civil War has had the bittersweet instrument of photography to make the death of our soldiers transparent. Now, not only do we have digital photography at our disposal, but we have instant forms of communication and broadcasting, such as internet and television, which allow us to witness firsthand the horrors that are occurring abroad. As a photographer, journalist, and an artist, Paul Watson is interested in documenting the truth in his experiences. The photograph that is referred to and projected repeatedly in the play evidently has an unspeakable impact on both him and the American citizens who see it.

"Mr. Brady has done something to bring home to us the terrible reality and earnestness of war. If he has not brought bodies and laid them in our dooryards and along the streets, he has done something very like it"

—*New York Times*, Oct. 20, 1862, on "Civil War Photographer" Matthew Brady's New York exhibit

## PTSD Past, Present, & Future

by Meghan M. Grady  
*Second Messenger*  
March 2010  
Issue

An excerpt from Stahl's illustrated anxiety, stress, and PTSD.

A significant minority of individuals exposed to traumatic events will develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with potentially devastating consequences for them and their loved ones. However, because formal recognition of this disorder is relatively recent there is still ongoing stigma associated with its diagnosis.

### **ACTION**

This article provides a historical overview of PTSD as a diagnosis, as well as insights into potential future revisions to its diagnostic criteria.

### **BENEFIT**

Recognizing the historical framework of PTSD and being aware of future changes to its diagnostic criteria are important not only for diagnosing individuals with PTSD but also for helping them accept that diagnosis and adhere to treatment.

A surprisingly high percentage of the population will experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetime (trauma being defined as a frightening situation in which one experiences or witnesses the threat of death or injury). Although not all individuals exposed to traumatic events will develop psychopathology--in fact, most do not--a significant minority will, with potentially devastating consequences for them and their loved ones. Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is perhaps the most common psychiatric illness to result from exposure to a traumatic event, and has a prevalence of 7-8%, with even higher rates for specific subpopulations (e.g., military personnel).

### **PTSD: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The psychological consequences of extremely stressful and dangerous situations such as warfare have been documented since ancient Roman times. It was not until the last thirty years, however, that those consequences

were recognized as anything more than weakness of character in the individuals who suffered from them. Though PTSD is not confined to war-related traumas, most evolutions of its name and hypothesized etiology have derived from examination of military experiences.

The first modern conceptualization of posttraumatic stress symptoms was described in 1678 as nostalgia and attributed to homesickness on the part of soldiers. Nearly two hundred years later, advances in modern weaponry contributed to such a large proportion of

situational personality disturbances.” This was not considered a true diagnosis but rather a temporary state experienced by a “normal” person who had experienced great or unusual stress. This entry was eliminated from DSM-II, with no corresponding replacement. Advances in the field of psychiatry, coinciding with the return of hundreds of thousands of Vietnam War veterans suffering from posttraumatic stress, ultimately led to the inclusion of PTSD in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual

DIAGRAM 1

CURRENT CRITERIA	CONSIDERATIONS
A. Exposure to traumatic event	Is this necessary?
1) Experience, witness, or be confronted with actual or threatened death or serious injury or threat to physical integrity of self or others	Too restrictive? Not restrictive enough? is indirect exposure sufficient?
2) Intense fear, helplessness, horror	Does this add to the diagnosis?
B. Persistent re-experiencing of the event (1 of 5 possible manifestations)	Does this add to the diagnosis? (does not distinguish between PTSD and normative response to trauma)
C. Avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma/numbing of general responsiveness (3 of 7 symptoms)	Strong predictor PTSD Too stringent and restrictive?
D. Persistent hyperarousal (2 of 5 symptoms)	Does this add to the diagnosis? (does not distinguish between PTSD and normative response to trauma, not specific to PTSD)

American Civil War soldiers exhibiting stress-related ailments--soldier's heart--that the first military hospital for the insane was established. Further advances in weapon technology in the First World War led to the proposed etiology of brain concussion caused by exploding shells, and hence the term shell shock. Other conceptualizations of posttraumatic symptoms at that time included irritable heart (overstimulation of the sympathetic nervous system) and war neurosis (Freud's suggestion that soldiers were reconciling their traumatic experiences in their minds). By the end of World War I posttraumatic stress was no longer attributed to physical brain injury, and by World War II the term battle fatigue had emerged, again with the implication that it represented weakness.

The first edition of the DSM contained the entry “gross stress reaction” under the category “transient

for Mental Disorders (DSM), published in 1980. Since then the diagnosis has been retained, although revisions to criteria have occurred, most notably with respect to the definition of a traumatic event.

**CURRENT DEFINITION OF PTSD**

(See diagram 1)

The current diagnostic criteria for PTSD (DSM-IV-TR) require exposure to a traumatic event (A) and development of symptoms related to that event (B through D). There is some degree of controversy surrounding each of these criteria groups; however, most controversy is with respect to criterion A. Debate exists surrounding the type of qualifying traumatic event, the degree of exposure required, and even whether a traumatic event should be required at all.

### THE FUTURE OF PTSD

Revisions to the diagnostic criteria for PTSD are likely, as planning for DSM-V is heavily underway and debate in the literature abounds regarding how PTSD should be defined, described, and classified. Specifically, the DSM-V posttraumatic and dissociative disorders sub-work group is considering (1) whether/how to revise A1; (2) whether to retain or revise A2; (3) whether to revise, reduce, or expand B, C, and D; (4) whether PTSD should be reclassified with adjustment and dissociative disorders rather than with anxiety disorders; (5) whether to add any new proposed trauma-related disorders; and (6) how to create developmentally sensitive criteria.

### THE BOTTOM LINE

PTSD is a disorder with significant impact on functioning and quality of life and should be diagnosed and treated according to the best available evidence.

Meghan M. Grady Director of Content Development, Neuroscience Education Institute

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## Discussion Questions

1. In Dan O'Brien's introduction, "Writing About Myself", he discusses whether the play is historical or political. Do politics appear to be a primary concern in the play?
2. Why is Paul haunted by the death of Staff Sgt. William David Cleveland? How does his guilt differ from a typical case of survivor's guilt, or does it?
3. How does the non-linear plot influence character development in the play?
4. Do you believe that art, specifically in the form of photography, has the power to influence public opinion?
5. Why do you think that the playwright chose to include the digital images throughout the performance? How did this aspect of the show change your interpretation of the dialogue?

## Local Connections

If Dan O'Brien's play and Paul Watson's experiences have had an impact on you, then you can contribute to the cause by helping our vets recover. For volunteer or donation opportunities, contact the VA hospitals in Portland and Vancouver, or get involved in the Returning Veterans Project. You can also visit Paul Watson's website to see more information regarding his Pulitzer prize winning work: [http://web.mac.com/paulrwatson/Where\\_War\\_Lives/Welcome.html](http://web.mac.com/paulrwatson/Where_War_Lives/Welcome.html)

#### Vancouver VA Medical Center

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Vancouver, WA 98661  
360-696-4061

#### Portland VA Medical Center

3710 SW U.S. Veterans Hospital Rd.  
Portland, OR 97239  
503-220-8262  
<http://www.portland.va.gov/giving/>

**Returning Veterans Project:** Free counseling and other health services for returning veterans and their families, visit <http://www.returningveterans.org/>