



Just deserters

Director Mallory Catlett and her fearless crew charge into the heat of battle.

By Helen Shaw
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The stage at HERE Arts Center looks like a bomb just hit. Where you expect to find the cast of *Oh What War* rehearsing, there are rickety wooden platforms clambering up to the lights and extending out over the audience. Beneath the plywood, a chaos of furniture and plastic sheeting and video monitors orbits a sad-looking pool that bubbles with queasy red mud. On the tech table, a drained Modelo can has been tipped disconsolately on its side. The show is right on schedule.

For those who have followed the collaborations between director Mallory Catlett and designer Peter Ksander, immersive sets like this one have become the norm. Earlier shows include *The Sewers* (a creepy journey down a Victorian cloaca) and *The Rise and Fall of the Rising Fallen* (a poker-faced fake-band performance that turned P.S. 122 into the belly of an oil rig). Now, this sprawl of detritus, hunched under the aforementioned platforms, plays right to Ksander and Catlett's strength: creating fantastical, claustrophobic alternate realities.

At first glance, *Oh What War* seems like more of the same. As in those earlier shows made with the collective Banana Bag & Bodice, text is supplied by Jason Craig, a writer who generates lyrical Tony Harrison-meets-Dr. Seuss lines. But this time, Catlett & Co. cast their gaze farther afield. *Oh What War* takes as its starting point Joan Littlewood's agitprop *Oh! What a Lovely War*, the legendary 1963 revue that mashed together deadpan statistics from World War I ("Average life of a machine gunner: four minutes") and the variety-hall songs of the day. This isn't the province of the "cool" or of some arch aesthetic; it's political theater.

Interestingly, Catlett doesn't much care for that genre. "I wanted to react to this war we're in, but I'm not a person who makes that stuff," she says. "Is there such a thing as good political theater?" And yet, in a process that has spanned the past three years, that question led her to Littlewood. And, the director reveals, "Peter [Ksander] loves World War I." Since the designer is upside down at the moment, screwing in a lightbulb 12 feet off the ground, he simply squawks: "I don't love it...I just think it's interesting. Don't write that I'm pro-trench warfare."

Regardless, Ksander has been obsessed with trenches for years, worrying about how to represent them. After a sudden epiphany ("I finally realized you just raise the horizon line"), he came up with this wooden structure. There are only three feet of clearance before the ceiling, and actors must crawl through it on their elbows, dodging lighting instruments like enemy fire.

Catlett and her ensemble—which includes Craig and chanteuse Kelli Rae Powell—also needed a revelation of their own. While reading background texts, they stumbled across historian Paul Fussell’s description of a myth widely believed by WWI soldiers. Catlett explains, “The men thought that there was a community of deserters somehow living underground, in abandoned trenches between the lines, scavenging for food in no-man’s- land. That legend gave us just what we needed: a group of characters both based in history and yet purely fictional.” The result is a discombobulating sequence of scenes, each one fetishizing a different aspect (mud, war-profiteering) of this otherworldly bunker existence. Noise artist G. Lucas Crane and a flickering video design make us feel like we’ve slipped down the rabbit hole. But this time, Alice went to hell.

“That’s done so much better by journalism and documentaries,” says Catlett. “Why try?” So instead, the team takes its direction from postwar Dadaists, heightening a sense of the absurd to try to shock society awake. Whereas the Littlewood original was a bitter, angry yawp, Catlett’s deconstructed version of the material is an entirely sensory one, perhaps hoping that this way, an audience can experience the insane contradictions of war.

“Our current situation bothers me because I feel there’s not much I can do; I let myself off the hook,” the director notes. “What was interesting about the Dadaists is that they weren’t looking away from war. Their work was political, and yet people never think of it that way.” Can they hit those same notes? “Every day in here, we’re crossing our fingers, knocking away at that question,” Catlett says.

Meanwhile, before they open, there’s still that junkyard set to navigate. Craig, tugging at his beard, murmurs, “All this onstage stuff is a mind-fuck in a lot of ways—I have to interact with all of it.” Ksander disavows responsibility. “I hate props. It’s all Mallory.” Catlett just shrugs. Whatever. War is messy.

Oh What War is at **HERE** through Oct 4.