

New Film Review from Larry Abbott: “This is Not a War Story”

Timothy Reyes (Danny Ramirez), a young Marine Lance Corporal veteran, spends his days riding subway trains throughout New York City. As he travels he pops more and more pills, surrounded by uncaring strangers oblivious to his plight. Eventually he is found in a deserted subway car, dead from an overdose. Dave Van Ronk’s song “Luang Prabang” provides an ironic counterpoint to Reyes’ suicide.

This sequence opens Talia Lugacy’s new film *This Is Not a War Story*. The four-year project, a collaboration which she calls a hybrid narrative, stars Lugacy and Sam Adegoke, and features veterans from the Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq wars who have found that the arts, music, poetry, and especially paper-making, prints, and handmade books, offer a chance to reconnect to others and to the broader society. Paper-making is a collaborative process with a tangible result, a transformation of experience, often traumatic, into art.

Lugacy plays Isabelle Casale, a Marine MP who, newly returned to the States from Iraq, cannot regain her footing. Her relationship with her brother is tentative, and her mother has rejected her, telling her before her deployment that “I don’t want to know nothing about you. You’re not mine anymore.” Incidents she observes on the street lead to flashbacks about her experiences in Iraq.

Lugacy is not a veteran, but she prepared for the role by immersing herself, she says “twenty-five hours a day, eight days a week” in the company of veterans at Frontline Paper. She continues: “I found the Frontline artwork online, and I was very moved by it. I got in touch with them and chased

after them until they agreed to be in the movie. The genesis of the film goes back to when I was writing a script that was contending with suicidal ideation and trauma. I had characters that were dealing with those issues. I gravitated to personal accounts by veterans and realized there was a lot of cross-over in their experience and mine so I thought I'd dig into that."

In a search for some sense of community, Isabelle reluctantly joins a veterans' paper-making workshop. In the workshop old military uniforms are cut up into small sections and become the base material out of which paper is created. Eli Wright, a former Army medic, one of the paper-makers, tells Isabelle that the vets "make handmade paper from military uniforms. We want vets to tell their own story in their own words and images." She admits that she "needs to be around people," and gradually becomes more involved in the workshop activities but hesitates at first to cut up her old uniform. Although it represents the pain and suffering she and others feel, the uniform is also a connection to a definitive part of her past. She leaves the workshop, non-committal.

Another participant in the workshop, Will LaRue (played by Sam Adegoke) is a three-tour veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan. He too has returned home unsettled. In order to regain a sense of meaning he became a peer-to-peer mentor for Timothy Reyes. Will feels intense guilt over Reyes' suicide, thinking he should have prevented it. Even though Will's peer-to-peer mentor, a Vietnam vet, tells Will that Tim's death "ain't on you," this doesn't absolve his guilt. The remorse interferes with his ability to maintain personal relationships.

The stories of Isabelle and Will intersect when he becomes her teacher in the workshop. On her second visit she ambivalently cuts up her old uniform and adds the shreds to the slurry, and Will tells her "everything goes into the vat . . . blood, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, South Carolina, sweat, Panama . . ." All of these elements of individual and national military

experience are incorporated into the final product, embedded in the paper, a visible record of war and its aftermath.

She looks to Will as a type of savior who will help her learn how to live again. Lugacy notes that “the confrontations and the bond between Will and Isabelle propel them into a deeper questioning of themselves, and into what it means, finally, to want to live.” Lugacy was deliberate in casting Adegoke, and indeed herself, in lead roles. She believes that it was essential to have a Black man portraying a more humanized vet than usually seen on screen. “The fact that our lead is a person of color representing the veteran experience makes the film extremely rare – almost all American films about veterans feature a white male protagonist and deal with the war through this lens.” She also felt it was important that the character of Isabelle not suffer from Military Sexual Trauma. She wanted her character not be defined by MST but to reveal how women “suffer, hurt, fight, and feel remorse and guilt for actions in war, no less than men do.”

Isabelle gradually opens up to Will and the other vets. She tells of her confusion at checkpoints when her CO said that the “only way to tell the good guys from the bad guys . . . the bad guys don’t stop.” But she realized that the good guys, fearful of imprisonment, might not stop either. She also talks about her interaction with detainees that she had to deal with in Iraq, and the guilt she feels for putting sandbags over their heads and confining them for questioning. In a poem she reads to the group of vets, “Detainee” (written by Kevin Basl), she says “I felt the black hole open . . . now they’re ghosts in my thoughts.”

Midway through the film she arrives announced at Sam’s rural home in upstate New York, still seeking his help. “Show me how to fucking live,” she asks him, “I don’t want to be dead.” He is unable to be the guide she hopes for, but they do become closer and tenuously break down the barriers of guilt and confusion. Before she leaves, they inscribe Timothy’s name on

luminaria and set them afloat at dusk on Seneca Lake, commemorating his life and in a way letting him go.

After she returns to the city she tries again to re-establish a relationship with her mother. In an emotionally-wrenching scene, her mother barely acknowledges her, more concerned with her makeup than her daughter. Isabelle leaves, distraught, and walks the streets of Brooklyn while a voice-over by Vietnam vet Everett Cox talks about his PTSD and thoughts of suicide ("I could not cross a high bridge without thinking of stopping and jumping. I must have spent a thousand hours on the George Washington Bridge"). As Isabelle wrestles with her psychological turmoil there is a parallel-action shot to Eli Wright cutting off Cox's uniform for the next round of paper-making, what Wright calls "a rite of passage," a virtual ceremony signaling a transition from the military world to the civilian world. He adds, "while cutting Everett's uniform off in the film, I said something about how we must expose the wounds in order to treat them. I approach the cutting of a uniform with care and compassion, just as I was trained to do as a combat medic."

Isabelle's stops on a bridge, staring down. Is she pondering a jump? The final shot of the film is her return to the workshop, choosing life, however painful, over death. There are no perfect resolutions.

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Lugacy has said of her film that "a person who views it will have their heart stirred awake and their mind charged with thoughts and questions. The film isn't telling you how to feel or what to think. It's capturing an experience of trauma, and an experience of people trying to deal with trauma. The viewer goes through the emotional experience rather than being told what to think or believe." A few lines from Jan Barry's poem "The Longest War" could be a coda to the film: "The longest nightmare/Never seems to/Ever/Quite come/To/An end."

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Lugacy was born and raised in New York City, and started watching movies seriously in her early teens. She worked in various positions in film production in her mid-teens, from production assistant to assistant director to writer, actress, editor, producer, and director. She graduated from high school a year early and received her degree in film from the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. Along the way, she was influenced by such directors as Andrei Tarkovsky, Stanley Kubrick, Ingmar Bergman, Robert Altman, Roman Polanski, and David Lynch.

Lugacy is currently Assistant Professor of Screen Studies at Eugene Lang College of the New School. She made her “breakthrough” film in 2007, *Descent*, starring Rosario Dawson. *This Is Not a War Story* is featured at the San Francisco IndieFest until February 21 and can be screened virtually. (<https://sfindiefest2021.eventive.org/films/5fd0240a140bcb0075ea380e>).

Cast Interviews:

Jan Barry, a Vietnam vet from “the class of ’63,” is a writer, editor, and activist. He is the co-editor of two seminal anthologies of Vietnam veterans’ poetry, *Winning Hearts and Minds* (1972) and *Demilitarized Zones* (1976). In 1981 he edited *Peace Is Our Profession*, in which artists and writers confront the threat of nuclear war. More recent work includes *Life After War* (2012), *Art Work in Progress* (2015) and *Hudson River Views* (2015).

Kevin Basl served in the Army as a Mobile Radio Operator with deployments to Iraq in 2005 and 2007-08. He co-edited the 2014 *Warrior Writers* anthology, and co-wrote *Warrior Writers Guide: How to Facilitate Writing Workshops for Veterans* (2018), and is the author of numerous essays about veterans. He curated “Rendezvous with Death: A Century of War Poetry by

Veterans” for the 2019 National Veterans Art Museum Triennial. Basl received his MFA in fiction writing from Temple University.

Eli Wright was deployed to Ramadi, Iraq in 2003-04 with the 1st Infantry Division and served as a combat medic. His poetry appeared in the 2008 and 2014 *Warrior Writers* anthologies. As a social justice activist he worked as a medic at Standing Rock in 2016 as part of a contingent of veterans. He now teaches paper-making to vets.

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Larry Abbott: Can you describe the collaboration process for writing the script?

Kevin Basl: Talia approached us a few years ago, interested in including a papermaking workshop in a film she was writing. Over a couple years, she regularly visited our art groups in New Jersey and Ithaca, NY. We would simply talk, make paper—just do what we usually do. She brought drafts of her script and we would give her feedback. In some instances, she asked us to create new work for the film. For example, Nathan and Eli made a couple silkscreen prints—one was a memorial to a friend who had died by his own hand during the writing of the film. I wrote two poems for Isabelle’s character, “The Detainee” and “The World You Once Loved.” I also wrote the song “The Wound That Will Not Heal.” So the process was fruitful for all involved. Incidentally, most of the dialogue between the veterans in the film is improvised. We’re just being ourselves. It’s all very personal.

Eli Wright: Talia consulted extensively with me and the other vets involved in the film to develop improvisational dialogue with very loose guidelines, and then allowed us to just be ourselves when the camera was recording. The dialogue represented our typical conversations when hanging around the studio space and doing work together. The bulk of the script

was written primarily for the two main characters Will and Isabelle, which she wrote and revised for nearly two years before shooting.

Larry Abbott: What is the importance of the film to Vietnam vets? Current vets? Civilians?

Jan Barry: It provides a window into the anguish of PTSD and survivor guilt and some creative ways of coping in collaboration with other vets and allies.

Kevin Basl: The film, hopefully, challenges a lot of cliches about veterans. Our attitudes toward military service are layered, nuanced. Many of us are not proud of what we did in the military. Hopefully the film will serve as a history lesson of sorts, too. I'm continually shocked by how little American citizens know about the post-9/11 wars—like the fact that we're still fighting them.

Eli Wright: I think the importance of this film for both veterans and civilians is that it portrays an often unrecognized or under-represented story— that many of us carry home a deep sense of betrayal and moral injury related to our combat experiences which has rarely been honestly or accurately portrayed in the polished patriotic propaganda that Hollywood has given us over the years. This film finally challenges that convention by casting real veterans to tell our own stories, instead of exclusively casting actors to tell our stories for us.

Larry Abbott: Do you see similarities between Vietnam vets and today's vets? In the film there seemed to be a feeling of camaraderie between the generations.

Jan Barry: Yes, there was a lot of camaraderie in this process of making art together. In many cases, vets of current wars are sons/daughters of Vietnam vets.

Kevin Basl: Many Vietnam War veterans have been mentors to us

post-9/11 veterans, especially in anti-war activist circles and artist communities, precisely what's represented in *This Is Not a War Story*. I've learned a lot from Jan and Walt [Nygard], the Vietnam veterans in the workshop in the film. We've sat in many writing workshops together, protested together, turned a lot of uniforms into paper together. What you're seeing on film are natural conversations we had while the camera rolled, totally impromptu. It's exactly the sort of conversations you'd hear if you stopped in at a papermaking workshop on any given Sunday.

Eli Wright: The camaraderie between generations that you see in this film is authentic because the elder veterans understood the anger and confusion that so many of us were struggling with when we first came home. We consider them as wise uncles and mentors who have helped guide us back to "the world" and divert us away from some of the self-destructive habits which were so rampant among their generation. They have taught us how to survive the biggest threat we face: ourselves.

Larry Abbot: In the film, paper-making is a path toward healing, transforming experience into art, finding new meaning. Jan, you've done some music with Darden Smith. What is the importance of the arts to the "healing process"?

Jan Barry: In making paper together from combat uniforms, vets often are triggered by an experience, which they may share with the group. The discussion then focuses on how to tell that story—visually, in writing, some combination. And work is done on it collaboratively. This is very different from vets getting together in a bar and feeling one has to top each other's war stories. Making art suggests there are creative ways to deal with life's current problems.

Kevin Basl: Art encourages people to see the world afresh, to transform things, to learn, to teach, to collaborate, to survive. In this sense, the process of traditional hand-

papermaking is not only a great metaphor, but is literally all of those things happening simultaneously. In my experience, art, writing and music especially, have allowed me to explore my memories, my conscience, my dreams, and my political convictions in a way I've not been able to elsewhere. I often write and make art with friends, but it's also a private, daily practice for me, like meditation. And like meditation, it can be as frustrating as it is rewarding. But it always keeps my mind working, always keeps me moving forward, and often takes me to interesting places. It reminds me that life is worth living.

I've been a musician since I was a child. I played hand bells in church, then later drums in the school marching band and guitar in jazz band. I also played in a rock band with friends in high school and college before the Army—playing bars, festivals, parties. I always had a guitar with me in the Army.

I started writing as a teenager, but didn't start taking it seriously until after the Army. What's important about the Army and deploying to Iraq in my artistic development is that my military experience actually gave me something to say. I learned a lot about myself and my country in that five years' time. After I got out of the Army and finished my MFA in writing, I got connected with a lot of veterans through Iraq Veterans Against the War and Warrior Writers who were using art to express themselves and build their own community and culture. It was a natural fit for me, and I got completely immersed in that world for about five years. I'm still deeply involved, but during those years that work is all I really did. Perhaps most importantly, I made a lot of great friends during that time.

Eli Wright: The work we do has always blurred the lines between art and craft. I've always seen papermaking as an important bridge between worlds. Through the craft of papermaking, we learn to build connections between communities, between individuals, between cultures, and also

between past, present, and future. Through the art we create on our paper, we've learned ways to make meaning out of complicated and difficult experiences. We've learned how to express through images that which cannot be said in words. Many of us tend to shy away from portraying this as a "healing" process, because it doesn't necessarily serve that purpose to everyone who engages with it. But for me, it has been incredibly helpful in processing trauma and grief, learning the value of mindfulness through a simple and repetitive creative process, and teaching me the value of solidarity within a community of fellow survivors. I've never claimed this work will save anyone's life, but it certainly saved mine.

Larry Abbott: Any final thoughts?

Kevin Basl: I sing "The Wound That Will Not Heal" in a bitter sort of voice—a voice often found in the poetry of veterans of unpopular wars. It's meant to be a confrontational song. It's meant to haunt the listener. The song is my answer to the question: why are so many veterans killing themselves? My answer—perhaps an unpopular one—has to do with the shame of participating in an unnecessary, costly war and then having the society that sent you want to simply move on as if nothing happened. No lessons learned, no change of course. Such circumstances can create a profound dissonance, warping a veteran's sense of justice, sense of virtue, sense of purpose. It can lead to self-loathing, and can really make a person feel like an outsider unless they get connected with a group of like-minded people who can help a person understand and give voice to such sentiments in a healthy way.

Eli Wright: I would like to point out something that I think is relevant about the recent storming of the U.S. Capitol. In the film, I tell a true story of how a large formation of vets, myself included, peacefully faced down an angry mob of riot cops at the 2008 DNC protests, without any injuries or arrests. So far, approximately 25% of those arrested for

storming the Capitol are veterans. For far too long, many of us have been fighting against the stereotype that we're all a bunch of crazy right-wingers who love violence. If you compare footage of our standoff in 2008 versus what recently happened in D.C., it's clear that we are not the same. *This Is Not a War Story* shows the world that veterans are not a monolith, we are complex and unique individuals just like anyone else. Many of us who've been to war and experienced the worst of humanity have been fighting like hell to make peace in the world through the disciplined practice of non-violence. I hope this film can show the world that we exist, we've always been here, and, sadly, we're not going away.