

## Puzzling Perspectives On Ever-Shifting Conflict Zones

Guerrilla by [El Conde de Torrefiel](#)

2016 Dublin Theatre Festival

As a theatrical experience, Guerrilla is deliberately enigmatic. I enter the theatre to find part of the audience seem to be taking their places onstage: drifting into the space, finding seats, stowing bags, talking to friends. We wait together, expectant and unknowing, for the performance to begin; but I gradually realize that those seated on stage do not see me. We are an audience, watching an audience.

As the performance begins, the onstage audience are excitedly introduced to Italian artist Romeo Castellucci, who delivers a lecture through speakers positioned behind me. The purpose of the performance I am watching is less clear. The supertitles that scroll above the spectators on stage don't translate the lecture, but rather begin to tell us about the geopolitical climate of the near-future world that the onstage audience inhabits:

At the end of 2020, Given the impossibility of stopping drug trafficking and in an attempt to end the drug wars, Mexico and Colombia legalize the growth, sale and distribution of cocaine and marijuana...

Between 2013 and 2023 more than one thousand acts of terrorism take place in major European cities: shootings in supermarkets; explosions in football fields; attacks in busy squares and car bombs in main thoroughfares...

The events described are all within our lifetimes and terrifyingly possible. The text tells us that the lecture the onstage spectators are engrossed in is happening at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2019 rather than 2016. In other words, they are in the same place, but three year ahead of us, and my curiosity is piqued by the possibility of benefitting from their hindsight. As if to capitalize on this, the projected text then begins to reveal personal details about a few of the onstage spectators:

The girl in the red jumper sitting on the right in the back row is called R. R is 26 years old. She was born in Zamora and has lived in Dublin for 3 years...

As I read some of their stories and family histories, the documentary component brings validation to the political context, while the fact that the performers themselves remain silently unaware of our gaze gives it all an air of voyeurism and gossip: the thrill of observing and learning about someone in the room without their knowledge. After some time, the scene abruptly shifts to a Tai Chi class where participants silently follow the slow movements of the instructor, and later another equally abrupt shift takes us to an electronic music rave later that night. In this final act, the stage fills with pulsating sounds and bodies while the political

discussions projected onto a scrim in front of them become increasingly disturbing and violent, questioning the very attraction to political theatre that the piece has drawn on:

Taking a selfie at the Vatican is pop.

Owning a piece of the Berlin Wall is pop.

Fascism is vintage.

Christianity is retro.

Islam is trendy.

The mushroom cloud over Hiroshima and Nagasaki made a pretty photograph.

Guernica is just a famous painting.

Auschwitz has become a theme park for tourists.

El Conde de Torrefiel is a Barcelona-based company headed by Tanya Beyeler from Switzerland and Pablo Gisbert from Spain. Their productions tend to be classified as contemporary dance, but with a decidedly philosophical bent. In their program note, Beyeler and Gisbert state that their work “ addresses the notion of temporality, with as a starting point the synchronic analysis of the present, an interrogation of the possibilities of our time. ” Other works currently being performed in rotation with Guerrilla include: Escenas para una conversación después del visionado de una película de Michael Haneke (Scenes for a conversation after viewing a Michael Haneke film), La chica de la agencia de viajes nos dijo que había piscina en el apartamento (The girl at the travel agency told us there was a swimming pool in the apartment), and La posibilidad que desaparece frente al paisaje (The possibility that disappears before a landscape). This last piece is a smaller cast companion to Guerrilla.



GUERRILLA created by El Conde de Torrefiel, direction and dramaturgy by Tanya Beyeler and Pablo Gisbert, photograph by Titanne Bregantzer. Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2016.

Since its premiere at the Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels in May 2016, Guerrilla has played at festivals in the Netherlands, Ireland, Austria, Greece, Switzerland, Scotland, England, and France, each time with a completely new company drawn from volunteers who, while they perform silently within the framework of the piece, add their stories and memories to the dystopic supertitles. The effect is one of simultaneously watching the onstage audience's actions while reading their minds. El Conde de Torrefiel echoed this intention in their program note, stating: "the text traces the tangled and complex chart of a landscape that appears serene, there is no conflict evident on stage as the battle is taking place inside their heads." It is an internal experience for the audience as well, since much of the interaction in the play flows through our own internal monologue as we read the supertitles. The discomfort, in the end then, comes not from the persistent loud noise of the third act rave, but from the predictions of future catastrophe that echo, both our personal fears, and the sense of helplessness that the current political climate has inflicted. As the program note continues: "If everything is progressing in an apparent state of peace in which we feel safe, why is it that inside our heads we involuntarily declare war?"

When I interviewed Tanya Beyeler, who directed the piece, she explained to me that the initial spark that became Guerrilla came out of a relatively prosaic feeling of frustration familiar to anyone attempting to make their living through the arts: "In 2014, with the economic crisis in

Spain, everyone was overwhelmed and overloaded [...]. We had to work a lot for little money and when we met we were stressed and it was hard to focus. There was a kind of activity and passivity in our lives. We were slaves to something or someone, but we didn't know who." The company started discussing this, attempting to search for the same kind of panoramic perspective on present circumstances that you get when looking at historic events. During a residency in Brussels, they spoke to participants about their parents' and grandparents' experiences of war, and began thinking about how unexpected the Second World War was to those living at the time, but how now, looking back it all seems inevitable. This subject is tangentially addressed in the initial lecture of *Guerrilla*, when Castellucci describes tragedy as ever present, like a fallen star: we go about our lives with this Damocles sword hanging over our heads that may drop at any point.

Through the summer of 2015, El Conde de Torrefiel organized a series of performed theatrical "happenings." They were interested in the sense of loneliness that can come even as we fill our lives with people and entertainment, so Beyeler sought out the image of a crowded stage: "The idea is of an internal war, of individuals sharing the same historical present, same action, same place, but each one has his history, his war, his personal world." In Manchester, England, for example, they worked with a large group of drama students to workshop the conference scene, deliberately choosing a lecture in Italian, a language that none of the participants understood. Back in Barcelona, they staged the rave by renting out the courtyard bar of the Antic Theatre and putting an event on Facebook inviting people to dance to electronic music for an hour in exchange for free beer. The text about a fictional future war was projected over them. Aesthetically for the artists of El Conde de Torrefiel, these experiments were designed to see how a singular image could be stretched over a text. For the audiences, these initial events in the UK, Spain, and elsewhere were stand-alone and unexplained, mimicking the hit-and-run of guerrilla warfare.

Like all good devised theatre both the concept and process is embedded in the finished production so that audience members get to share the exploration. The full script, currently touring around European festivals, places three of the happenings next to each other, each describing a different form of pleasure: intellectual pleasure of the conference, the spiritual pleasure of Tai Chi, and the ecstatic bodily pleasure of the electronic dance session. Dramaturgically, the pace slowly increases as the calm of the lecture gives way to the movement and shape of Tai Chi and finally into a storm of frenetic dancing. We are abruptly pulled out of each scene while it's still in session as a black drop cuts it like a guillotine. While Beyeler admits that this fuller and more organized three-act production might compromise the spontaneity of the original happenings in favor of structure, the fact that the piece is refreshed each time allows it to retain the feeling of a unique experience.

The idea of using an onstage company of local volunteers emerged from financial necessity but has become integral to *Guerrilla*. A couple of weeks before a production, a call goes out for volunteer performers (no experience necessary). These volunteers fill out a questionnaire that asks them some basic personal information and for stories about any experiences of conflict. Three of these stories are selected and woven into the first act of the script. The rehearsal process then takes place over an intensive three or four-day period. El Conde de Torrefiel tells the volunteers the bare minimum about the text that will be projected over them, allowing them

to concentrate instead on their objective, which is to explore and perform the three different forms of pleasure. Their lack of awareness provides the contrast that the audience must navigate and is necessary for the impact of the piece, however it does raise ethical questions about putting naïve performers on stage. While I don't believe that this company in any way intentionally harms or mis-informs their participants, the nature of the work relies on their inability to give fully informed consent to the message of the play that their bodies will help deliver. Beyeler says that she has to warn the performers not to expect immediate applause from their audiences, saying it is not a reflection of their work, but of the difficult nature of the piece. They presumably accept this condition out of trust for the company, but only fully understand what they have participated in when they are finally allowed to read a script towards the end of the run.



GUERRILLA created by El Conde de Torrefiel, direction and dramaturgy by Tanya Beyeler and Pablo Gisbert, photograph by Titanne Bregantzer. Kunstenfestivaldesarts 2016.

The company has been aware from the beginning that the relevance of the fictional scenarios changes with the political climate of the time and location of the performance. Their first performance took place in Brussels two months after the terrorist attacks at the airport and on the metro, and a piece from Guerrilla played in Paris two weeks after the Bataclan attacks. In Paris, they were concerned that the bombardment of the electronic music in the third act, that they had chosen in order to metaphorically represent internal and external onslaught, might be too traumatic for a city still reeling from a mass shooting in a nightclub. Indeed, the imagined scenario held much more direct relevance than they had initially intended for both the performers and the audience.

Similarly, the population of volunteer performers can change the story drastically. Beyeler reports that in most places they have performed they tend to attract a group of young, hipster, bourgeois white people who share their stories of conflicts of love or work and reflect on stories of war that their grandparents had told them. However, in Geneva the producers partnered with a refugee agency and the volunteer performers who came from this group had much more direct experiences with political conflict. The stage picture here was a very different as well, reflecting to the largely white audience, the brown faces of refugees from the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Europe. Here stories of the Second World War in Europe were mixed with stories of escaping Pinochet 's Chile and the story of a man who had arrived in Switzerland in 2012 from Afghanistan through Turkey and Greece. This piece continually adapts to find new relevance by drawing on the experiences and fears of each group of performers.

During their first technical rehearsal, El Conde de Torrefiel realized that their piece did not yet have an ending, but this seemed appropriate for a production constructed on multiple, often conflicting perspectives of the future. So, at the last line the music abruptly stops, the lights behind the scrim go out and the house lights go up. Beyeler describes this as leaving: “ a big question floating over the heads of the audience ” and this was certainly my experience at a late night performance at the 2016 Dublin Theatre Festival. I was left in the dark, without the catharsis of a curtain call or introduction of the actors, as if the whole thing had been a dream. But the fact that the stories playing out in our heads had reportedly been those of ordinary local people seated in front of us brought their experiences more immediately into focus and made our shared fears for the future all the more consequential.





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Talya Kingston is a dramaturg and educator with a particular interest in new play development and theatre for social change. She was the Education Director at Hartford Stage and a long-term Visiting Professor at Hampshire College. She is originally from Britain and returns each summer to co-teach a University of Massachusetts course at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Talya ' s writing on theatre has appeared in Theater Journal, The Moving Voice, HowlRound, and the Valley Advocate. Her professional dramaturgy credits include: the premiere of Eve Ensler ' s Necessary Targets at Hartford Stage/Variety Arts Theatre, the US premiere of Helmet by Douglas Maxwell at the New York Fringe Festival, an immersive production of The Lonely Soldier Project by Helen Benedict, Seriously... What Did You Call Me? written and performed by Onawumni Jean Moss at the Ko Festival and Late Style, a stage adaptation by Tanya Fernando, of conversations between Edward Said and Daniel Barenboim featuring performances by members of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. Talya is currently based in Barcelona and is working on a play for young audiences about climate change.

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