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VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Audience responses to *Contact!Unload*: A Canadian research-based play about returning military veterans

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Abstract: *Contact!Unload*, a research-based play co-developed with veterans and community members, depicts the experiences of a group of veterans serving in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) and their transition home after overseas combat. The play was first produced in April 2015 in a professional theatre venue in Vancouver, and has subsequently been staged 15 times across Canada. To date, eight veterans have taken part as performers in this theatre initiative led by researchers in counselling psychology and theatre. This article takes a close look at the impact the theatre project has had on audience members and their perceptions of the play. Audience impact was measured through a mixed methods approach, using three focus group sessions, four interviews and a post-production written survey by audience members.

Subjects: Theatre & Performance Studies; Community Theatre; Drama Education & Drama Therapy

Keywords: research-based theatre; assessment; audience

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

George Belliveau and his team have developed a research programme in the social sciences, humanities, and the performing arts that has focused on developing innovative methods for mobilizing knowledge through theatre. This forging of interdisciplinary collaborations to develop a unique theatre-based methodology has been used to enhance the well-being of refugees, cancer patients, teachers, students and, as depicted in this article, soldiers and their families. This research-based theatre model combines theatre with other disciplines (i.e. health, medicine, education, counselling) by bringing to life multiple forms of research data (i.e. interviews, field notes, focus groups, surveys) in performative ways.

His recent co-edited book with Graham Lea *Research-based theatre: An artistic methodology* (2016) published by Intellect, illustrates both the range and potential outreach of research-based theatre. His other recent edited book, *Soldiers performing self in Contact!Unload: Innovations in theatre and counselling* (Belliveau & Westwood, 2016) relates directly to his article, by offering a detailed look at his work with returning military veterans, artists and counsellors.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article focuses on a men's mental health project called *Contact!Unload*. The core of the Movember-funded project centred on developing a research-based play with veterans and community members. The art-based initiative aimed to depict the experiences of veterans who served in Afghanistan (and elsewhere) and their transition home after overseas combat. The play was first produced in April 2015 in a professional theatre venue in Vancouver, and has subsequently been staged 15 times across Canada. To date, eight veterans have taken part as performers in this theatre initiative led by researchers in counselling psychology and theatre. This article highlights the impact the theatre project has had on audience members and their perceptions of the play. Audience impact was measured through a mixed methods approach, using three focus group sessions, four interviews and a post-production written survey by audience members.

1. Introduction

Developed in 2015, *Contact!Unload* is a research-based theatre piece that shares the stories of veterans returning home post-deployment. The play is based on the lives of soldiers depicting what it means to transition back to civilian life after suffering trauma-related psychological injuries while in combat. It includes both original stories and composite scenes. *Contact!Unload* went through a three-month development process in early 2015, before premiering at Studio 1398 in Vancouver, British Columbia in April, 2015 for three sold out performances.¹ The play emerges directly out of the work that Dr. Marv Westwood developed with the Veterans Transition Program (VTP) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) over the last two decades (Westwood, 2009; Westwood & Wilensky, 2005). This highly successful group therapy programme has already seen over 700 returning soldiers participate. The VTP's approach, along with the compelling stories of veterans, became the core content in the play *Contact!Unload*. Artist-researchers, along with counsellors and veterans formed the development team, and they created the play based on the literature in the field of group counselling with veterans (Balfour, 2009; Balfour, Westwood, & Buchanan, 2014; Hassall, 2014), interviews and focus groups with veterans, and theatre devising techniques (Belliveau, 2007; Norris, 2009). The rich collective playbuilding experience has been explored in detail elsewhere (Belliveau, 2017), along with in-depth reflections from the veterans about the play creation and performances (Belliveau & Westwood, 2016).

Two of the artistic leads on this project, Belliveau and Lea, have been engaged in dramatizing research data on several projects, and they have written extensively about their approach (see Belliveau, 2006, 2008, 2014, 2015; Belliveau & Lea, 2011, 2016; Lea, 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014; Lea & Belliveau, 2015). This approach of performing research reflects a current trend in a number of scholarly disciplines where embodied forms of knowledge mobilization are becoming more commonplace (Boydell et al., 2016). This liveness and theatre-based approach allows for health-related issues, such as veterans suffering from trauma-related psychological injuries, to be brought forward in ways that evoke emotions and support cognitive understandings. The impact of performing research about health-related findings has been well recognized in various disciplinary fields, with health researchers (Deloney & Graham, 2003; Gray, 2003; Rossiter et al., 2008) providing a prominent voice in writing about how research-based theatre approaches have the potential “to enliven and enrich findings otherwise seen as dry and detached from real lives” (Shah & Greer, 2017, n.p.). This form of knowledge mobilization resonates with current requests from funders (i.e. CIHR and SSHRC) where researchers are encouraged to disseminate knowledge in innovative ways to reach a broader public. Audience members who witness research-based theatre are presented with work that taps into the affective, along with the cognitive. According to Shapiro and Hunt (2003) research-based theatre approaches “have a uniquely compelling emotional quality, making it difficult to avoid or intellectualize the struggles and suffering portrayed” (p. 923). To this end, the article investigates the impacts *Contact!Unload* had on audience members who watched the play in the Fall 2016. Moreover, we reflect on the strengths and weakness of our assessment methods as well as share lessons learned.

The quantitative and qualitative approaches we used to assess audience impact in our study are informed by current literature in research-based theatre. Previous research theatre projects have made use of a variety of methods and tools to assess audience impacts with respect to awareness, knowledge, attitudes and/or behaviour change. Data collection methods in other projects include a written survey (Tuokko et al., 2013), in-person focus groups (Kontos & Naglie, 2007), phone interviews (Blignault et al., 2010), an electronic survey (Pator et al., 2016), direct observation (Kontos et al., 2012), post-performance audience discussions (i.e. talkbacks) (Hundt et al., 2011) and written submissions such as an essay (Belknap, Haglund, Felzer, Pruszyński, & Schneider, 2013). Previous studies have most commonly utilized a mixed methods approach (Blignault et al., 2010; Cox, Kazubowski-Houston, & Nisker, 2009; Sinding, Gray, Grassau, Damianakis, & Hampson, 2006), while some have used exclusively a quantitative or qualitative approach (Jonas-Simpson et al., 2012).

In our literature review we have discovered that some projects measure audience impacts immediately following the performance, along with one or more follow-up assessments (Kontos et al.,

2012); nonetheless, many conduct a single post-performance assessment (Mitchell et al., 2011; Rustveld et al., 2013) which takes place immediately after the play. We chose to use a written survey, in-person focus groups and phone interviews that included post-performance and follow-up assessments in order to elucidate both immediate and longer term impacts of the research-based theatre performance. The assessment approaches used in *Contact!Unload* were informed by best practices, but they were also the result of the expertise of the research team,² resources and time available, and ethical permissions. In the final section of this article we return to this discussion and consider ways to improve future evaluations of audience impacts.

Although not the focus of this essay, the impact the play has had on the veterans participating in *Contact!Unload* has been closely documented (Marshall, 2016; McLean, 2017). McLean's study shows how the play continued the healing of the veterans as they shared their stories with the public. All of the participating veterans had undergone at least 100 h of group therapy through the VTN with professional counsellors prior to beginning the theatre project. Both Marshall (2016) and McLean (2017) note through their respective in-depth qualitative studies how each of the veterans extended their therapy in the theatre project. The veterans found new ways to express themselves and release some of the trauma-related anxiety that had developed as a result of their service overseas. Marshall and McLean's findings are commensurate with another research-based theatre study involving 17 Second World War Holocaust survivors living in Israel. In their study Peleg, Lev-Wiesel, and Yaniv (2014) found that in the act of retelling their stories the participants experienced a form of healing. The act of sharing their stories publicly to a theatre audience played an integral role in enabling the survivors to process their trauma in front of a sympathetic and attentive audience. These findings about the participants led us to further explore the audience's experience.

The following sections of this article take a close look at the impact the play has had on audience members who witnessed *Contact!Unload* in the Fall of 2016. To undertake this investigation, we conducted a post-production written survey that was developed for the September 2016 tour of the play and filled out by audience members immediately after seeing the play. Then, we examine feedback gathered through a series of focus groups and interviews with audience members who saw the 15 September 2016 production and/or film version on 9 November 2017.

2. Methods

Audience impact was assessed using a mixed methods approach. This work was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of British Columbia.

2.1. Quantitative methods

A short written survey was developed with six 5-point Likert scale questions: (a) "I liked the play", (b) "I think the play accurately showed the struggles of veterans returning home from conflict overseas", (c) "I think it was essential to the play that the actors were veterans themselves", (d) "The play made me more aware of non-physical wounds caused by going to places of conflict", (e) "The play made me better understand the need for programs to support the healing of veterans" and (f) "I think theatre is an effective way to educate Canadians about veterans struggling with mental health in silence". In addition, the survey contained two demographic questions, one question about awareness of the Veterans Transition Network (VTN), and space for contact information if the individual wanted to be included in follow-up evaluation activities. A hard copy of the survey was included within the play's programme that all audience members were given as they entered the performance space. An announcement was included at the start of the show asking audience members to fill out the survey before leaving the theatre. A clearly identified box on a table was placed near the exit to collect responses, and for one performance, we had a team member explicitly designated to collect the survey. All quantitative analyses were conducted using R (Version 3.3.1) (R Core Team, 2016).

2.2. Qualitative methods

The qualitative analysis is based on a series of three focus group sessions, along with four interviews, that took place in February 2017 facilitated by Carson Kivari, a trained clinical therapist who was familiar with the VTN approach and the theatre production. All the participants of these focus groups and interviews were recruited from the post-production surveys where they indicated that they were willing to participate in further research. In total, we reached out to all 45 people who provided contact information, and 18 agreed to attend the February 2017 follow-up sessions. Focus groups were hosted in the evenings at a central location close to transit while phone interviews were arranged based on participant's schedule. We used the same guide and facilitator for both the focus groups and interviews in order to increase comparability across data collection activities. For the focus groups, we provided dinner and for both data collection activities we gave participants \$15 gift cards to say thank you for their participation.

Five guiding questions were raised during the approximately 120 min focus group sessions, and 30–60 min interviews. These were: (1) what were some of the main messages of the play?; (2) did seeing the play affect your understanding of issues related to veterans; (3) have you discussed the play with anyone after seeing it?; (4) has anything happened in your life that was influenced from seeing the play?; and, (5) what do you think about using theatre to present this type of work? The aim of this qualitative research was to deepen our understanding of the survey results by exploring the visceral, artistic, and meaning making of audience members. All sessions were audio-recorded and each participant gave their consent to have their views shared for research purposes. One of the authors (Nichols) was present for each focus group session.

Both authors (Belliveau & Nichols) listened closely to the audio-recorded interviews and a transcription of relevant sections was undertaken in order to engage in the qualitative analysis. The authors then engaged in a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2015) where each person independently looked for patterns in audience responses across data-sets pertinent to our central research question around the play's impact on the audience. Themes and subthemes were compared with any discrepancies discussed until a consensus was found.

3. Quantitative results

A total of 116 people filled out the survey at four performances in three Canadian cities (Vancouver, Ottawa, Kingston) between September and November 2016. Within this sample, there were 63 females (62%), 37 males (37%), one person identified as other (1%) and 15 people did not respond to this question. Most of respondents were civilians ($n = 72$, 68%), while 8 were military (8%) and 26 were friends or family of someone in the military (25%). Lastly, the majority ($n = 61$, 60%) were not previously aware or unsure of their awareness of the VTN, while 40 people (40%) said they were aware.

Most people ($n = 112$, 97%) somewhat or strongly liked the play. Almost all respondents ($n = 113$, 97%) somewhat or strongly agreed that theatre was an appropriate medium to educate Canadians about veterans struggling with mental health in silence. The majority of people ($n = 104$, 90%) somewhat or strongly agreed that the play accurately represented the struggles of veterans returning home from conflict overseas. The majority of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that the play increased their awareness of the non-physical wounds suffered by veterans who go to places of conflict ($n = 103$, 89%). An even higher number of people ($n = 110$, 96%) somewhat or strongly agreed that the play helped them to better understand the need for support programmes for veterans. The actors being veterans was an important element of the play, with 96% of respondents somewhat or strongly agreeing with this statement ($n = 110$).

4. Qualitative results

A total of 18 people participated in the focus groups and interviews, where the majority were civilians ($n = 14$, 78%) while the remaining were military personnel ($n = 2$, 11%) or related to someone in the military as a family member or friend ($n = 2$, 11%). Almost a quarter ($n = 4$, 22%) of participants

were visible minorities. Age categories were distributed with six participants aged 20–39 (33%) and 6 aged 40–59 (33%) followed by five people aged 60–79 (28%) and one person preferring not to disclose (6%). There were more females ($n = 10$, 56%) than males ($n = 8$, 44%). A total of 14 people (78%) had received an undergraduate or graduate university degree and just over half of participants ($n = 10$, 56%) had seen more than three theatre shows in the past year.

Three key themes emerged from this analysis: (1) Veterans as performers matters to audience impact; (2) theatre is a viable medium to share the veteran's experiences; and (3) the play raises awareness and knowledge of veteran's issues. In the following paragraphs, we explore how each of these themes was discussed by audience members.

4.1. Theme 1: Veterans as performers matters to audience impact

In the first version of the play in 2015, there was an equal amount of veterans and civilians performing in the play. However, it became clear in post-production debrief sessions with the artistic and clinical team how the authenticity depicted by the veteran performers resonated more deeply with the audience. Therefore, the following versions of the play included almost exclusively male veterans on stage.³ This hunch about the authenticity of having primarily veterans performing was validated by the post-performance survey in September 2016 where audience members responded strongly (96%) that it was important to have veterans depict their own stories. Focus group member responses provided us with specific reasons as to how and why having the veterans performing themselves in the play resulted in a deeper impact on them as witnesses of the play. For instance, one respondent suggested that the impact is much deeper because “you know that they've done it, and they tell their own stories ... you can't act that” (focus group 1). A number of respondents in the focus groups pointed to how the veterans made it more authentic, “you could hear it in their voice, it was real, it was raw ... not acting, not sugar-coated” (focus group 2). Others talked about the bravery of the veterans to be on stage sharing their own story and the courage it took “to be emotionally available to a group of audience members” (focus group 1). A female participant commented on how she “cared so deeply about these men by the end of the piece” (focus group 1). The authenticity of the veteran performers seems to have been directly related to audience emotional and cognitive impacts.

A few participants mentioned that if the play were performed by actors, the actors would have likely performed a more polished and better acted version of the veterans, than the veterans could perform themselves. However, several focus group participants felt this would have resulted in a less impactful play. According to one participant, he “was more satisfied by seeing who did it, and what they achieved. People acting their own stories” (focus group 3). Another participant spoke to a “visceral understanding because it was performed by veterans” (interview 1). He goes on to describe “the way they move, tone of voice, how they carry it ... because they are veterans I can trust that what they're saying is authentic. No one is filtering, tinkering with it” (same). Another person commented that because the play used veterans, “it didn't feel like acting when I was watching it. It felt like I was very intimately watching someone experience something that was real. I almost felt like I was intruding on someone's very private moment of healing” (focus group 1). A participant who currently serves as a medic in the Canadian Armed Forces said that “hearing the play from my peers really drove it home” (interview 2). He went on to talk about how he felt proud to hear these veterans tell their story, bare their souls in front of a public. One of the focus group participants sums up a number of key reasons why it was deeply important for her to have veterans on stage, to tell their own stories about the difficult transition home post-deployment:

The strength and courage to do this is huge ... they aren't out there saying, ‘I am a veteran and I served. Give me gratitude.’ They just quietly come back and suffer quietly or heal quietly or whatever they do. They come back and they do it very quietly and privately in this country. It's just the nature of how we are here I guess, so for me, I felt a huge amount of gratitude to them. That they would actually step up, outside of that box and educate us, to bring us into their world a little bit, to come into our world to show it to us. I just, to me that is a lot of courage and I think that is a huge part of what was bringing the tears ... I just wanted to hear more and to thank them. (focus group 1).

4.2. Theme 2: Theatre as a viable medium to share the veteran's experiences

The veterans who performed in the play were all graduates of the Veterans Transition Program, which makes use of a group therapy process called Therapeutic Enactment (TE). This group-based approach is featured within the play, and some of its roots stem from theatre traditions, in particular embodied role playing. Therefore, in this sense using theatre as a way of representing the veterans' stories seemed a natural extension to the work for the project. The veterans were familiar with sharing and re-visiting their stories as a group, using embodied approaches in TE. However, a key feature of a TE is that the playing out of an individual's story is always done in an intimate, safe space where only participants that are part of the TE process are witnesses. Replaying, reliving these intimate stories (lived experiences) for a theatre audience opens up the model and risk taking, making public some very personal moments of struggle. Another critical piece is that a TE, which explores one veteran's story, can easily take up to three hours to unfold. For practical reasons, *Contact!Unload* could only show a glimpse of a TE and how the process works.

From a research perspective, it was unclear how theatre as a medium would translate both these personal stories and the effectiveness of TE. Consequently, this assessment of the work explored the audience's perspectives on how the medium of theatre might serve to share the stories of veterans and the therapeutic model. The survey found almost everyone (97%) felt theatre was an appropriate medium to educate people about veterans' mental health struggles. The qualitative work explored what was unique in the medium of theatre that might impact an audience in terms of raising awareness of veterans' issues and deepen understanding of returning veterans' transition to civilian life. A number of focus group participants spoke about the emotional impact theatre offered to the veteran's stories: "I've never been to a play where I've felt like this ... it's real life, a unique hybrid of theatre and real life" (focus group 1). Several participants also discussed whether this was indeed theatre, or a docudrama. One participant mentioned that they forgot many details from the play, "but the emotion is still very present" (focus group 1). What lingered for several participants was a felt experience, as theatre engaged both the cognitive and emotional through its liveness. One participant suggests how "putting a human face to the issues makes it vivid. You read about it in the paper or hear it on the radio/TV, but this play made it real. It's humanizing" (focus group 3). One person compared the medium of theatre to other forms, suggesting how "films, books, can be turned off, paused, put aside ... theatre forces you to listen and stay captive. The immediacy of theatre can't be replaced" (focus group 1). Another participant builds on this notion of theatre's unique ability to convey a message in comparison to other media: "A play is more impactful – newspaper article will tell the facts, but the play will humanize the experience ... with various levels, nuances, and the delivery of the lines. The play shows the journey, rather than the product" (focus group 3). One participant suggested that the play was a good example of how theatre shows the explosive emotions you don't get in a book: "You see the characters explode. The play shocks you" (focus group 3). Another observation made by a few participants was how the medium of theatre creates a forum where audience members witness a shared experience both during and after the performance. This idea was extended by one of the interview participants who suggested that with theatre "you get to share it with other people at the same time, so it's not an isolated experience ... you feel connected to a community, new understandings emerge through the play ... and a lot of emotion post-play, because an event took place, a shared experience in the theatre" (interview 1). The humanity and emotional connection the veterans offered within the production surfaced as a key finding in the analysis of audience responses. This pointed to how live theatre provides a valuable mechanism to inform and educate a public, as well as activate a visceral and emotional response to issues veterans face, in particular the psychological challenges coming home post-deployment.

4.3. Theme 3: Play raises awareness and knowledge of veteran's issues

A key goal of the production was to bring the stories of veterans transitioning home post-deployment to the stage, showing the audience how veterans who have experienced stress and psychological injuries as a result of their military service can find pathways towards recovery through therapeutic help. In showing this difficult transition from soldier back to civilian life, the play aimed to raise awareness of what many of our military soldiers bring back psychologically when they

return. Rather than an outside voice reporting on what stress and trauma injuries might look like for veterans, *Contact!Unload* plays them out for the audience through first-hand accounts by the veterans. Audience members witness veterans re-live moments of anxiety, depression and suicidality.⁴ Then, on a hopeful note, the play presents opportunities for veterans to heal and cope, as they seek professional counselling and support from their fellow veterans to address their trauma and begin the recovery process.

Respondents in the focus groups highlighted several ways the play increased their understanding about trauma and veterans' psychological injuries. One audience member spoke about how,

the ways in which the stress and anxiety and trauma can materialize and how it can materialize differently for each person. Some of the characters responded to it by being a little overzealous ... wanting to commit to another tour while for another person it was a lot of anger, and for another person it was kind of being sombre, really keeping to himself, denial. (interview 3)

Audience members discussed a new understanding about what causes trauma for veterans, with one audience member explaining that the play made her realize that, "you don't need to be on the frontlines to see something that can be traumatic. Just being there can have an effect on you" (focus group 3). Another participant noted that anyone could suffer from psychological issues after being in a combat zone, regardless of age, rank and previous experience, as "no one is going to be immune to ... dealing with something that soldiers ... you know something that is unique to that type of profession. It's probably not a matter of if you're going to be affected but rather when, and at what level, and how" (interview 2). People also became more aware of the ripple effect of trauma, where those around the person suffering can also be impacted:

After watching that performance, I just thought there are a lot of, a lot of unresolved and hurting people who are vets and just a lot of people, like their families, their communities, their work environment etc., etc., etc. Like these degrees of people that are negatively affected. [by the unaddressed trauma] (focus group 3)

For a number of people, "veteran has this connotation of this old person" (focus group 3), yet the play demystified this notion as a number of veterans portrayed in *Contact!Unload* are "these young people" (same). One audience member expressed how the play "challenged [my] stereotypes. I had this stereotype of army guys before ... like they just want to go fire guns or something, and that's why you would go, and join the army. But I feel like after watching the play ... that was sort of destroyed for me" (focus group 1). The play also appears to have taken away the abstractness of the terms veteran and war, because, "all of those concrete elements: their bodies, their faces, their uniforms made me feel like I was in contact with something" (focus group 1).

Multiple people talked about a new understanding around the magnitude of veterans' psychological issues with respect to overall prevalence, in particular, "the need for help being quite great among veterans" (focus group 2). Also, several focus group members discussed the intensity in which it can affect a person. One audience member suggested how "it is a lot deeper and bigger in [the veterans'] minds than anybody around them know ... these people are suffering a lot more than we even have an inkling of" (focus group 3). Others felt the play highlights how veterans' issues remain invisible to the general public as "a lot of people don't know the suffering that goes on" (focus group 1). The play was also seen to have increased awareness around the many different factors that might cause mental health challenges faced by veterans. One respondent spoke about how veterans "come back and are not fitting in here ... that disconnect between where they are, and where they were ... [they] are just kind of lost" (focus group 3). A few people noted how traditional ideas of masculinity make it even harder for returning male veterans to talk about mental health or seek help, because "it sort of weakens the person that is there. Makes the person feel like they aren't

strong enough to do what they are suppose to be doing and it's that manliness that stops a lot of people from getting the help" (focus group 2).

In addition, the play seems to have raised people's awareness about how "it was important for those guys [veterans] to find somebody they can talk to" (focus group 2). One respondent highlighted the play's main message was that "it's okay to come out and tell your family and tell your friends about [mental health issues] because that will actually help you" (focus group 3). Several people mentioned that they were pleased that effective support was available for veterans: "It was exciting to me to know there is some therapy that does succeed ... to see something where people had found a way to successfully help these people with the issues" (focus group 2). Respondents also emphasized how important the group element seemed for the therapy's success, because "what they accomplished as a group was more than he [the main character] would have accomplished with just one person" (focus group 2). Respondents in the focus groups highlighted several ways the play increased their understanding about trauma and veterans psychological injuries. Lastly, audience members highlighted how the play sought to address current stigma around mental health issues. As one person highlighted, the play was "trying to address the stigma around it [post traumatic stress disorder] and trying to encourage people to seek help ... to feel comfortable and okay" (interview 3). The comments above point to how audience members took away new insights, and how the play generated a platform to engage and inform the public on the topic of veterans and some of the challenges they face post-deployment.

5. Discussion and implications

The audience feedback gathered from *Contact!Unload* shed light on the kinds of impact theatre with veterans had on those who viewed the play. The supporting evidence suggests that using theatre was a successful medium to educate and engage the public around some of the veterans' issues and available supports. Through this assessment process, several lessons were learned around what practices and approaches worked well, and areas of improvement that may be helpful to future research-based theatre projects. In sharing the following guideposts below, the authors offer suggestions about effective ways to assess research-based theatre projects, such as *Contact!Unload*. The guideposts are informed by the literature review and a close, reflective analysis of this veterans' theatre project. We are of course conscious that each project is unique and tailored to meet its particular objectives, therefore the suggestions are meant as guides for consideration.

5.1. Methods to assess audience impacts

Measuring audience impacts was not initially a focus of this project, as the initial goals were action-based: to introduce and create theatre within a therapeutic environment with military veterans. However, we, the authors of this article, suggest that it is important to think about measuring audience impacts and various forms of audience engagement at the conceptualizing stage of a research-based theatre project, so that the intended outcomes can inform both project and audience assessment designs. This will also facilitate audience impact activities to be included within the research ethics application and thus eliminating the need to submit an amendment later on. In this audience research study, we also discovered that thinking about the play objectives and team expertise should be a critical starting point when selecting measurement methods. For example, in our case we wanted to understand the longer term impacts of watching the play, therefore we included follow-up measurement activities to study these impacts, mainly through phone interviews and in-person focus groups.

Budget, team expertise and project timelines should all be considered when selecting audience impacts methods. It is also important to note that this project chose a mixed methods approach utilizing a written survey as well as focus groups and telephone interviews based on team expertise and available resources. Other methods to consider beyond surveys, interviews and focus groups, include recording the talkback during post-performance, direct observation and large group facilitated discussions. All these approaches have been effectively utilized in other projects, as we discuss earlier in this article, to measure and engage audience feedback. Others are encouraged to consider the full breath of options before selecting those that best fit their project's context.

5.2. Developing the measurement tools

It is critical to connect the expected outcomes with the measurement tool. The research team's strategy was to have the group brainstorm expected outcomes before designing the written survey and interview/focus group guide. More specifically, we answered the following questions before designing the written survey: What would a successful project look like for me? What do I think the audience will take away from watching this play? For the interview/focus group guide, we developed it based on the results of the post-performance survey along with project objectives and team feedback, which emerged from interactions with audience members after the performances. Other recommendations for post-performance measurement tools include trying to ensure people can fill it out quickly (i.e. limit the open-ended questions so questions primarily use Likert scale or true/false response formats), and pilot the tool with people outside the project to help ensure questions are measuring what you want to address. Lastly, we found having a research member with evaluation experience and expertise on the team essential for this stage of the research. We therefore encourage future projects to ensure their team includes someone with evaluation expertise.

5.3. Lessons from the post-performance survey

The research team learned several lessons from this work to improve the survey sample size. While some audience members filled out the survey before leaving the performance space, many had forgotten about it and left behind the survey with their programmes. We therefore learned that it was essential to have extra copies of the survey in the lobby and space to fill the survey out to maximize the response rate. Moreover, the announcement about the survey before the performance seemed to have limited utility, as many forgot about it during the show. It would therefore be more efficient to include an announcement at the end of the performance, or following the talkback. Lastly, we received substantially more responses when we had a dedicated team member collecting the survey at the performance, in comparison to when it was left to the performance group to collect surveys. We found that a dedicated member responsible to gather surveys was able to prompt people about the survey by asking them if they had filled it out, along with answering questions, providing copies of the survey and/or a pen if needed, and drawing people's attention to the activity by standing at the table where surveys were being dropped off. We therefore recommend future projects to dedicate a project member for this task during project planning to ensure someone is assigned this role at all performances.

5.4. Lessons from follow-up interviews and focus groups

These activities require a budget to provide group refreshments, provide tokens of appreciation to participants (we provided \$15 gift cards) and to pay for staff to facilitate and analyse the data along with the allotted time within the project. We recommend groups thinking about follow-up activities at the time of project design. People looking to do follow-up activities need to ensure they collect contact information from individuals at the performance. These qualitative activities required at least one team member with previous facilitation experience and strong coordination skills. We also used a neutral, fact-based initial question for the focus groups (i.e. What do you think the main messages of the play were?). This approach enabled people to recall the play, eased them into sharing within the group, and built group cohesion within the focus groups. Several audience members commented on how answers to this first question helped them remember more about the performance. These follow-up activities were essential to unpacking longer term audience impacts of *Contact!Unload* after the immediate reaction of the performance faded. We encourage others to plan for follow-up activities within their projects to understand longer term impacts of research-based theatre.

5.5. Limitations

This study has some potential limitations. For example, we do not know the exact number of audience members who attended the shows, as all shows were free and most were without tickets.⁵ This means it is impossible to know response rates of the written post-performance survey. The authors would therefore encourage future projects to designate a team member to count audience members during each performance, so a response rate can be calculated. Moreover, the responses were

very positive from our survey. It is unclear if there was response bias where those who responded differed from those who did not respond to the survey. Put differently, we do not know if those who liked the performance were more likely to fill out the written survey than those who did not like it. It is then possible that these audience impacts do not reflect the entire audience. We attempted to limit response bias by following practices from previous research-based theatre projects, including having anonymous surveys and providing an evaluation drop box, rather than having to hand it to a team member. We believe this would increase the diversity of responses, as it would remove potential barriers that may prevent audience members who were not the most engaged from participating. [For some performances, as noted above, we had a team member explicitly attempting to increase the survey sample.] Despite our efforts to maximize responses, survey respondents self-selected to participate and the sample size is moderate. The findings may therefore not be generalizable to all audience members. Similarly, we exhausted our sampling frame for the focus groups. While we did hear some similarities between interviews and focus groups, it is possible that we did not reach saturation and/or the results are not representative of all audience members. For these reasons, the findings should be interpreted with some caution.

The creative team encountered some ethical challenges during the play development and theatrical performances that are beyond the scope of this article. However, other publications on this project explore some of the ethical issues, and how the creative and research team responded (see Belliveau, 2017; Belliveau & Westwood, 2016; Prendergast & Belliveau, *in press*). To date, there has been limited exploration of ethical considerations around audiences witnessing research-based theatre plays (Guillemin & Cox, 2017), in particular scholarly work that examines the ethics around potential harms of exposing the audience to a theatre performance that shares difficult stories and may illicit negative emotions. Future research is needed to address this gap.

5.6. Final thoughts

While audience assessment requires additional resources, we believe that assessing the impacts of research-based theatre is essential to discover if a project is meeting its intended objectives. By generating a space for formal feedback, projects are better informed about the reception of their output and how their messages are being received by audiences. As importantly, it provides valuable insights for future directions. With *Contact!Unload* the play was performed 12 times before formally collecting audience feedback. The feedback from the survey, focus groups and interviews provide a kind of litmus test, helping our research team assess how we are doing, and guiding the next stages of the project. It also enables the research team to let stakeholders and funders know what kinds of impact the play is having on viewers. Research-based theatre is an interdisciplinary approach that offers unique opportunities for knowledge generation and knowledge mobilization. As the methodology continues to evolve, it is essential to have researchers develop diverse ways to measure audience impacts and levels of engagement in ways that can capture the breadth of anticipated outcomes. While this work represents just two of many methods available to assess audience impacts, we encourage others to think more explicitly about evaluation when creating and performing research-based theatre.

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Notes

1. The play has been performed 18 times to date, reaching over 1500 audience members, including Prince Harry of Wales at Canada House in London, England and Canadian Members of Parliament in Ottawa. The first version of the research-based play was 50 min. in April 2015. A shorter 20 min. version of the play was created in November 2015 in order to tour in the UK. Finally, a 30 min. version was developed to tour in Ottawa in the Fall of 2016.

2. The research team refers to George Belliveau, Jennica Nichols, Marv Westwood and Carson Kivari. However, only Belliveau and Nichols engaged in the writing of this article.
3. Women military were welcome to participate, though none stepped forward to be part of this project in our call for participants.
4. The veterans performing in the play were supported by counselors throughout the process, and they were at a stage in their recovery where they felt ready to play out their authentic stories.
5. Some shows used Eventbrite to reserve a free seat.

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