

Play/War

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[Rachael Richman](#) · March 13, 2010

In the tiny space of Where Eagles Dare Theater, the harmony of two men's voices fills the dark. Outside the wind and the rain bang against the windows, but some cold part of me has already melted. Urban Research Theater's *Play/War* held my rapt attention from the first moment to the last, and I barely breathed except to laugh and occasionally gasp.

The lights reveal two opposing figures. One man is tall, dark, and lyrical in an elegant suit; the other is solid with a buzz cut, an American in army fatigues. They circle each other warily, tensed for fight or flight, then launch into a series of attacks. But battle for life instantaneously becomes a vaudevillian struggle over a hat, and then just as seamlessly transforms into a tender touch, a headlock, wide-eyed stillness.

The title *Play/War* is an apt description of this impressive work created and performed by Ben Spatz and Maximilian Balduzzi. Between the two men, there is a tension that, thankfully, is never resolved. Are they mortal enemies? Innocent playmates? Lovers? At one point, even the actors themselves argue, asking of one another, "Who are these characters? Are they real? No, they are just pretend. No, they are real."

On a bare stage with only basic lighting, the bodies and voices of the actors are the only instruments, and Spatz and Balduzzi are masterful. I was captivated by the precision and range of their movements. They seemed to explore extremes: tension and release, quick and slow, intimacy and isolation. Once or twice the combat sequences felt like drawn-out exercises, and could perhaps be shortened. However, every moment was infused with focused energy and awareness, whether they deftly leapt over one another's backs or slowly shifted their gaze. As one audience member observed, "They worked hard. That was a nonstop workout."

One of the greatest pleasures was the music made by the performers. There were aching melodies and folk songs and even a rap number, all in a melange of languages. Their broken-down versions of children's songs told of violence and war, repeating lyrics such as, "the soldiers have taken all the men / we'll have to start all over again."

It was a shock when, about halfway through, the first words were spoken. But with brief exceptions, the actors' speech was perhaps closer to music than to naturalism. Sometimes it was as if they were children, trying on the alien language and aspect of men. At one point, the characters gently investigate pieces of each other's bodies with innocent curiosity.

Play/War has the feel of vigorous experimentation. Spatz and Balduzzi seem to ask the question: what is it to be two men? And the evolving answer might be: it's complicated. As they edge closer to some tense union, the two characters literally remove their layers. But have they been revealed? Or are there only endless layers underneath?

VENUE

[Where Eagles Dare](#)

OPENED

March 12, 2010

CLOSED

March 14, 2010

RUNNING TIME

1 hour

No Intermission

CREATORS & ARTISTS

Created & Performed By

Ben Spatz and Maximilian Balduzzi

Producer

Urban Research Theater