



Centre dramatique  
national  
de Saint-Denis

DIRECTION  
JULIE DELIQUET

# The Unwomanly Face of War

BASED ON THE BOOK BY **Svetlana Alexievich**  
DIRECTOR **Julie Deliquet**



2025 PREMIERE

Théâtre Gérard Philipe  
59 bd Jules Guesde 93200 Saint-Denis - France

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## THEATER

# The Unwomanly Face of War

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WITH

**Julie André**

*Valentina (SERGEANT, ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN COMMANDER)*

**Astrid Bayiha**

*Olga (STRETCHER-BEARER, RIFLE COMPANY)*

**Évelyne Didi**

*Antonina (INTELLIGENCE AGENT, PARTISAN BRIGADE)*

**Marina Keltchewsky**

*Tamara (GUARDS SERGEANT, STRETCHER-BEARER)*

**Odja Llorca**

*Alexandra (GUARDS LIEUTENANT, PILOT)*

**Marie Payen**

*Lioudmila (DOCTOR, RESISTANCE FIGHTER)*

**Amandine Pudlo**

*Klavdia (SNIPER)*

**Agnès Ramy**

*Nina (SERGEANT MAJOR, STRETCHER-BEARER, TANK BATTALION)*

**Blanche Ripoché**

*Svetlana (JOURNALIST, WRITER)*

**Hélène Viviers**

*Zinaïda (STRETCHER-BEARER, CAVALRY SQUADRONS)*

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LIGHT **Vyara Stefanova**

COSTUMES **Julie Scobeltzine**

GENERAL MANAGEMENT **Pascal Gallepe**

SET CONSTRUCTION **Théâtre Gérard Philipe Workshop**

COSTUME CREATION **Marion Duvinage**

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LIGHTING MANAGEMENT **Sharron Printz**

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**RUNNING TIME : 2h30**

# Svetlana Alexievich: *Voices of Utopia*



The Unwomanly Face of War

A Belarusian professor, author and journalist, unfairly overlooked by the wider public, she became the first Russian woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015 for her entire "polyphonic work, a memorial to suffering and courage in our time."

Svetlana Alexievich's books seem to speak of the past, but actually expose state violence that remains present today. In this sense, she is an opponent through her very literature. She has also taken an active stance against the war in Ukraine and the rise of violence in Russian society.

From the Great Patriotic War to the collapse of the USSR, through the war in Afghanistan and the Chernobyl disaster, she revisits tragic episodes of history from the perspective of those who lived through them.

She works in the form of investigation, collecting the stories of people she meets in order to create not "a truthful object" but a genuine literature work:

*"I don't ask about socialism, but about love, jealousy, childhood, old age. About the music, the dances, the haircuts. About the countless details of a vanished life. This is the only way to integrate the disaster within a familiar context and try to tell something, to guess something... History focuses solely on facts ; emotions always stay on the periphery. It's not customary to let them enter into history. As for me, I look at the world with the eyes of a writer - not a historian's."*





# Women of all wars

*"I think of Eleonora, a lieutenant colonel in my unit. When she speaks she always makes jokes that are so funny, because she's used to being only among groups of men."*

## **Correspondence between a Ukrainian couple separated by war, 2024**

Nineteenth-century Europe predominantly rejected the presence of women in the military and considered bearing arms incompatible with femininity, reserving it for men who held political power, from which it was inseparable. Female claims proved fruitless and transgressions of this gender norm were rare. In the twentieth century, the feminization of armies began, but initially only concerned medical care and logistical support. The two world wars and decolonization wars amplified female mobilization; it forced most European armies to establish an enduring legal framework to allow women to become soldiers like any others – in other words, like men.

At the end of the German-Soviet Pact, the Germans invaded the countries of the Soviet Union and women took up arms to fight the Hitlerian armies. According to figures, between eight hundred thousand and one million served in the army forces, not forgetting those who joined partisan groups similar to the French Resistance.

Although there are countless books about war (the earth has already known more than three thousand wars), Svetlana Alexievich notes that women are barely represented in them. Everything we know about war has been told to us by men. We are prisoners of "male" images and women always take refuge in silence.

The testimony of one of them in a journal gave her the idea to go interview others, and from meeting to meeting – more and more numerous as word spread that a woman was collecting the stories of women who had fought in the war – the idea was born of a text that would make heard not one of these voices, which would be representative of all the others, but all these voices.

*The Unwomanly Face of War* is her first text, a documentary essay constructed from these stories – captured on audiotape – of women who participated in the Great Patriotic War. Svetlana Alexievich devoted seven years of her life to it between the 1970s and early 1980s and travelled all over the USSR to meet them.

Hundreds of recorded cassettes, thousands of meters of magnetic tape and more than five hundred interviews relate the experiences of these women and make us live their epic while they evoke their memories where daily life, terror, and resistance intermingle.

For younger generations, this account bears witness to those terrible years of World War II, but also to what Stalinism was. As to us, the generation of Europeans who grew up in this rupture between West and East – the Fall of the Berlin Wall only dates from 1989 – we were immersed in the stories of World War II and then of the Cold War. These Soviet women had sisters in arms in the British army and in the resistance movements of all occupied countries.

Our thoughts turn to Charlotte Delbo, writer and resistance fighter, who returned from Auschwitz: *"Starting a new life, what an expression. I returned to my job [...] I live like a sleepwalker whom nothing shall awaken."* The solitude of the person who "comes back from there", it is as if she were coming back from another world.

# My meeting with Svetlana Alexievich

Berlin, July 2024

Svetlana Alexievich has been living in exile in Berlin for four years now. Alexander Lukashenko's regime is threatening to seize her apartment back in Minsk. She welcomes us into her home and serves Turkish coffee in a beautiful *djezva*. When she hears us speaking French, she tells us how much she loves hearing the language—she lived in Paris for three years. When she first started writing *The Unwomanly Face of War*, she confides, everyone told her that everything had already been written on the subject, and more importantly, that she had no business writing it: what moral right did she have as a woman to write about war when she'd never even held a weapon?

## THE WAR IN UKRAINE

We cannot start our interview without mentioning Russia's war against Ukraine. The greatest difficulty for Svetlana Alexievich today with *The Unwomanly Face of War* is that the Russians are currently doing what the Germans did in 1941. Russia is behaving today like the Nazis, she tells us: "Putin doesn't give a damn about Europe and human life, including that of Russians, just like Stalin in his time. And Trump threatens to come to power..."

She is currently writing based on interviews about the revolution of Belarusians and Ukrainians, but she is not writing directly about the war in Ukraine. She tells us it's up to the Ukrainians to do so, and they are doing it.

## THE AGE OF WOMEN

Svetlana Alexievich tells us that when she interviewed her subjects, she spent entire days with them, they cooked together—she had to confide in them too to make them talk in turn. She took advantage of May 9<sup>th</sup> gatherings, Victory Day, to meet several at once.

They were all around 50 years old, and Svetlana Alexievich, from the height of her 20 years, found them "old." Her youth pleased the women; they trusted her. They were wary of journalists, but told her: "You, you can stay, we'll have a drink." They saw in her what they were when they were young on the front.



Julie Deliquet, Svetlana Alexievich, Marina Keltchewsky

## WOMEN'S BODIES

Svetlana confides that at the time, women didn't want to talk about rape, but she remembers that when they went to the bathroom in the evening, they were afraid to pass in front of the men, and said to themselves, "How is this possible... I just saved him..." The rapes were there, present, but Svetlana found herself facing an older generation that didn't talk about that. The women declared: "I don't care to tell you more about it. You can just talk, like the others, about my decorations."

Svetlana Alexievich began her investigation at 25, having just finished university. She tells us that today she would seek to go deeper into the question of rape, of amenorrhea, of the fact that women thought they could never give birth to children after the war. She herself says she was too young, too romantic, and she strongly encourages me to do it today and to go further on this question in my show.

## THE STALINIST DICTATORSHIP

Regarding the numerous and similar declarations about the fierce desire to enlist to defend the homeland at such a young age, I ask her what part Soviet education played in this will to go fight. Svetlana Alexievich answers that it was a generation raised for that! In the 1970s, Svetlana could criticize Stalin, but the women avoided the subject. It was a generation like there will never be again. These women had been raised as equals to men, so for them, they could and should go fight like men.

At the fall of the USSR in 1991, some women called Svetlana back to add things about cruelty, about Stalin, about sexual abuse and this "other war" they had to face afterward. Before dying, people felt the desire and need to speak out, to finally talk.

## TODAY...

Today, speaking would be impossible, she tells us. Fear and danger have returned, and people keep quiet again. It was a beautiful time when people still spoke, she brightens up! Perestroika was a period of liberation of speech. *The Unwomanly Face of War* was removed from school curricula by Alexandre Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin. Since Svetlana Alexievich officially declared herself against the war, her works can no longer be staged in theaters there. However, her books continue to sell and she receives royalties: it's a great contradiction.

We pause for a moment. Svetlana Alexievich spots an alert on her phone from the New York Times that just came out, naming Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets among the hundred major works of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She tells us that *The Unwomanly Face of War* was elected among the hundred major works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



## PROPAGANDA, INVISIBILIZATION, OBLIVION THEN CENSORSHIP

*"Very early on, I took an interest in those who are not taken into account by History. These people who move in darkness without leaving a trace and who are asked nothing."*

Svetlana Alexievich puts her finger where it hurts: the state's demand for sacrifice and broken lives. Was it worth it? There clash upholders of patriotic sacrifice and critics of totalitarian regimes. This same message runs through her entire work: what is the fate of human being facing the crushing state machine? Each of her books is a diagnosis that explores the unspoken and breaks taboos.

This is the first time a woman who has written about war has won the Nobel Prize in Literature. There have been stories and novels by women about war, but ultimately quite few, if we consider that they represent half the earth's population and suffer from war as much as men.

This precious account therefore brings new light to World War II. These hundreds of women's testimonies reveal an unknown part of our European history in ending Nazi barbarism. Their courage and acts of bravery did not receive rewards commensurate with their sacrifice, they will be forgotten in the official rhetoric. Despised, ignored, considered as "impure women" after they returned, they fell silent. These testimonies break forty years of collective silence.

*"They were silent for so long that their silence, too, turned into history."*

Upon its publication in 1985, the work was censored. Some accounts it voices were inaudible, contrary to the official version of history that Soviet propaganda guaranteed. When Svetlana Alexievich returned to this text in 2003, she therefore began by restoring what was suppressed at the time by censorship, but also by herself, who had anticipated it. In this latest version, we can discover raw confessions, both in the war facts recounted and in the intimacy revealed: women who see children die, who have their periods and cannot hide it from the men, who rejoice to hear the bones of enemies crack under their horses' hooves.





# Starting from a documentary work

**MIXING POLITICS AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE  
1945 - 1975 - 2025**

This is the second time, after *Welfare* by Frederick Wiseman, that I have the desire to adapt a documentary work. However, it is the first time that my medium is literary and not cinematographic and that the author is a woman.

I have almost always brought to the theater the voices of a generation other than my own and staged an era I had not directly experienced, but which spoke to me about us today. The dramas of an extraordinary epic daily life are universal. To be interested in human beings, to stage their experiences, feelings, thought processes, more than the facts themselves and their unfolding, is to privilege life stories over history.

Born shortly after victory, in 1948, Svetlana Alexievich also did not participate in the war. She writes for those who experienced war, which will forever be part of their destiny, but also for those who were born after and for whom these war stories are part of their history today.



*"I write not the history of war or the State, but the history of men and women, thrown by their time into the epic depths of a colossal event."* This choral form of writing offers an unprecedented perspective on History and war, often related solely through the masculine prism. The challenge of the play is to try the human experience of speech that gives itself and gives life to memory and the necessity of speaking, like a democratic collective reconstruction. To tell the reality of war: hunger, exhaustion, fear, cut hair, oversize boots and uniforms, devastated landscapes, abuse, irrational stubbornness that seeks to restore meaning to what has none, deep pains and unexpected joys.

*"Don't be afraid of my tears. Don't pity me. No matter that I hurt, I am grateful to you, you offered me the means to find myself again. To find my youth again."*

Women remember war as a period of their life. What becomes most important to them is the human part, the intimate part of their past. War is not composed only of great events; it is also made of small details that compose the ordinary of life. There, everything coexists: noble and vile, simple and terrible. But it's not horror that we retain, at least it's not horror so much as human resistance in the midst of horror. Their dignity and firmness. The way humans resist the inhuman; precisely because they are human.

Today, we think of the Ukrainian women of the invisible battalion, the Colombian women of the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), and the Kurdish women of the Women's Defense Units fighting against ISIS in Syria. Behind the combat of these insurgents also plays out, implicitly, another struggle: that for women's emancipation.



## THESE PROFESSIONS HELD BY WOMEN

In 2019, with the Paris Opera, I produced *Violetta*, a film at the crossroads of documentary and fiction about two major institutions: Gustave Roussy hospital in Villejuif - Europe's largest cancer center - and the Bastille Opera. I filmed the healthcare professions within the hospital: nursing assistants, nurses, oncology hairdressers, reception staff... And at the Opera, the technical professions: dressers, hairstylists, make-up artists, stage managers, show callers... All these professions were held by women.

Svetlana Alexievich says she had to resign herself to adopting a selection criterion to avoid being overwhelmed by all the testimonies that reached her. Her criterion would be that the interviewed women had at least two jobs during the war, to account for a less limited perspective on the broader phenomenon in which their experience was inscribed.

Each of us sees life through their profession, through the place they occupy in the world: a nurse saw a certain war, a tank driver another, a paratrooper a third, a pilot a fourth, the leader of a machine gun section a fifth... In war, each of these women had their own field of vision.

The first days of the war, recruitment offices found themselves overwhelmed by young girls who wanted to enlist as volunteers and take up arms. Most still high school students, they wanted to train as quickly as possible, and not just to be nurses, cooks, or telephone operators. For them, going to war meant being on the firing line, going to the front, as stretcher-bearers, snipers, sappers charged with clearing land of mines, fighter pilots, machine gun section lieutenants, doctors, tank drivers, surgeons, anti-aircraft gun servants, heavy tank driver-mechanics, anti-aircraft gun commanders, radio-telegraphers, foot soldiers, sailors, transmission agents. These words had no feminine form, because these professions had never yet been performed by women...



Painting by Molly Lamb Bobak, 1946

First woman to be appointed war artist in the Canadian army





## Synopsis

### RECORDINGS OF FORMER COMBATANTS

They came from the four corners of the country, some wearing medals and military jackets, others carrying lily of the valley and carnations. Former comrades from the front gather in the intimacy of a communal apartment, surrounded by countless sinks, water heaters, gas stoves, and drying laundry. In the spring of 1975, at the height of the Cold War, a young journalist has come to collect their testimonies on tape.

We enter then into an unknown world—an isolated continent where women live with their own memory. Hell cannot be told, can barely be imagined, so only they can understand each other. From the Nazi invasion in 1941, thousands of young Soviet girls enlisted to fight against Hitler's armies. As they tell their stories, History gets gradually humanized, and the women move away from myth to return to themselves. Into themselves. They no longer speak of the war, but of theirs—the very one that was stolen from them.

These women, thrown by their era into the epic depths of a colossal event, were not acknowledged by books, by the State, and remained silent for so long that their silence too became history.

By speaking out, these women are reborn to themselves, and it is not only the abject that is revealed—despite everything, humanity stands firm and resists. It rises up, denounces, and questions our duty of memory for generations to come and the evil that lies in wait for us and always will.



# Characters



## ***Svetlana***

JOURNALIST, WRITER

## ***Nina***

SERGEANT MAJOR, STRETCHER-BEARER IN A TANK BATTALION

## ***Valentina***

SERGEANT, ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUN COMMANDER

## ***Olga***

STRETCHER-BEARER IN A RIFLE COMPANY

## ***Alexandra***

GUARDS LIEUTENANT, PILOT

## ***Zinaïda***

STRETCHER-BEARER IN CAVALRY SQUADRONS

## ***Antonina***

INTELLIGENCE AGENT IN A PARTISAN BRIGADE

## ***Lioudmila***

DOCTOR, MEMBER OF THE RESISTANCE

## ***Klavdia***

SNIPER

## ***Tamara***

GUARDS SERGEANT, STRETCHER-BEARER

# A women's troupe



*"The faces have faded away from my memory, only the voices remain."*

The ensemble theater I champion is an art of listening. The actresses will listen to their characters and their partners just as Svetlana Alexievich listened to these women.

Through the numerous testimonies in *The Unwomanly Face of War*, I want to bring together a generation of actresses aged 45–50, adding one woman of 70 and another of 30, thus creating ten life journeys. Each female character will be led to encounter the other and their common territory: war. This human assembly will become a life experience, a reincarnation of the past played out live before the audience's eyes.

Under each woman's figure hide two faces: the one who tells her story today and the one she was long ago, at the time of the events.

The Unwomanly Face of War

## A VIBRANT TRIBUTE TO ADOLESCENCE

This production is a creation exploring the ages of women, particularly two transitional ages. These soldier women were around 15 years old; some had their first periods at the front. Adolescence is an extremely recent concept—for a very long time, you were either a child or an adult. There was nothing in between. You passed directly from one age to another. Today, the World Health Organization defines adolescence as a "period of growth and human development between childhood and adulthood." Françoise Dolto, who worked extensively on these questions as a pediatrician and psychoanalyst, speaks of a "phase of mutation as crucial as birth is for the small child and the first fifteen days of life."





## THE STAGES OF LIFE

And now, how do we characterize the age group of 50 year-old women who speak in *The Unwomanly Face of War*? This difficulty in naming reflects a broader phenomenon of invisibility that affects women from age 50 onward. In her essay *The Second Sex*, in 1970, Simone de Beauvoir already noted the difficulty of tracing the history of women caught in the upheaval of menopause. Welcome to the "grey area." Between young woman and idealized grandmother, girls lack models in this in-between age. Yet with experience and maturity, they emancipate themselves from social constraints and norms. They know who they are, free themselves from that inner eye that judges them. As essayist Belinda Cannone declares: "Let us be powerful, my sisters, because thus joy of living and fire will be maintained."

What interests me about *The Unwomanly Face of War* is showing the construction of a collective through the ignored journeys of these women. By staging the testimonies of women who fought in yesterday's war, I try to question the condition of women, but also the place of women, children, and men affected by today's wars. To replay them each evening in the theater, to re-summon their words, is to give them life again through all their singularity and touch a form of universality.

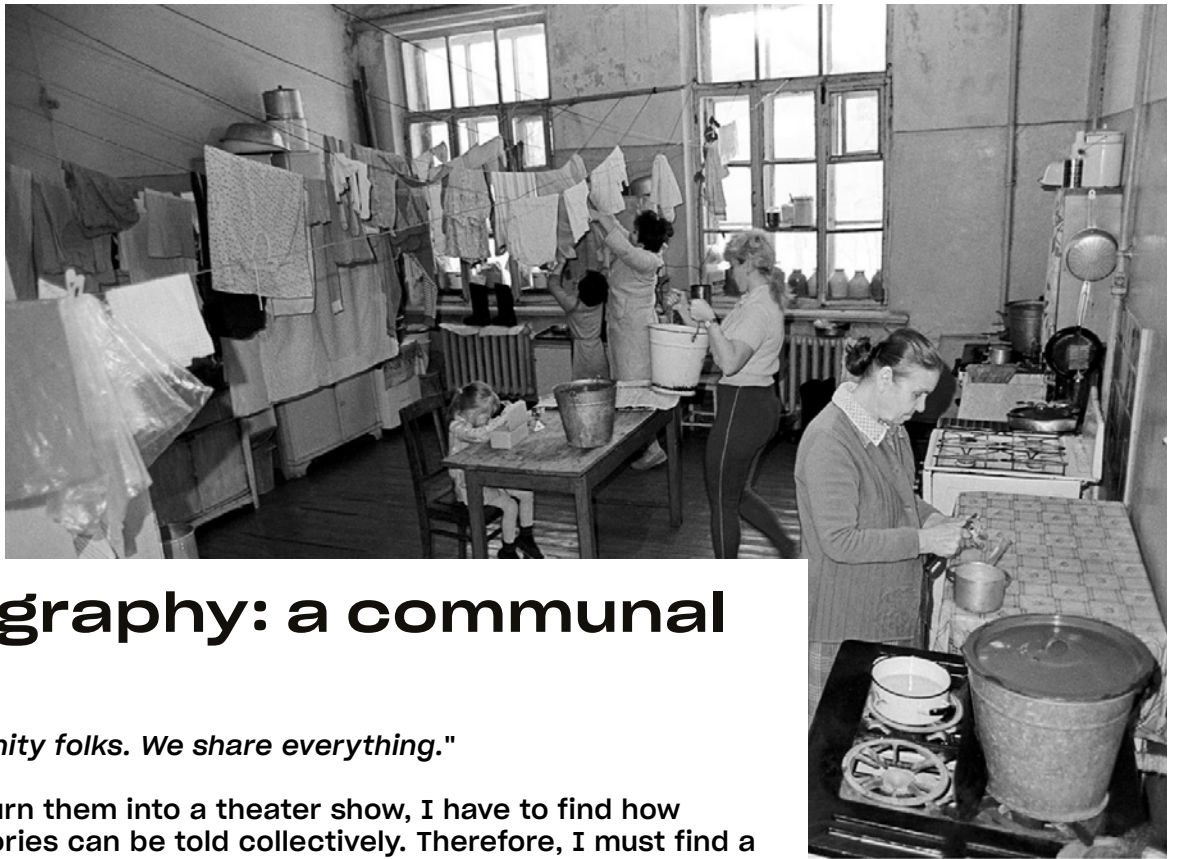
*"Women's experience of their bodies is still too often unheard."*  
**Claire Simon**



After the October Revolution, Soviet women obtained the right to vote in 1917 along with equal rights with men, leading to major reforms, notably the authorization of abortion in 1920. The women's department of the Communist Party developed an original approach extending socialist feminism and aimed at changing women's place in the new Soviet society. Marginalized even before the beginning of Stalinist repression, this movement was short-lived, and Soviet dogma would be that the "women's question" had been resolved in the USSR, in Stalin's own terms.

In contemporary Russia, feminism is one of the few opposition movements not to have been destroyed by the waves of persecution led by Vladimir Putin's government. Dozens of militant feminist groups are active throughout the country and call on feminists worldwide to unite against the military aggression launched by Vladimir Putin's government.





## Scenography: a communal home

*"We are community folks. We share everything."*

By deciding to turn them into a theater show, I have to find how these war memories can be told collectively. Therefore, I must find a common place.

After the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), the government decided that citizens would live together and created communal apartments by requisitioning private homes or by reorganizing state apartments into which local authorities crammed as many households as the apartment had bedrooms. Residents shared the kitchen and bathrooms. Due to the very large number of deaths and disappearances during the war, such a measure was not strictly necessary. Under the Soviet regime, housing was most often free or low-rent; it called on the people to combat the bourgeois way of life, which represented an obstacle to communism.

Daily life in communal apartments was strictly regulated by a set of rules. Each resident had only about thirty minutes per day to use the bathroom. During these few minutes, some had to bathe their children, wash themselves and their clothes. There was even a special schedule for drying clothes. Laundry was mostly hung in the bathroom and kitchen.

There could be up to fifteen rooms in a *kommunalka*, each housing a family. One can imagine the chaos that reigned in the kitchen! There were several burners as well as tables. Voices and the whistling of stoves formed an enormous racket, permanent steam escaped from the cooker, and the entire apartment was bathed in a mixture of different smells.

In the 1970s, more and more people began to have their own apartments and left the *kommunalki*, but others still lived there, notably former female combatants.

It is a gateway, a corridor between interior and exterior, between stolen youth and adulthood, between private and social life, between reality and memory, between testimony and imagination, between yesterday and today.

*"The history of the USSR, its ideology, its people, its human behaviors that often perplex us are reflected in these apartments, when they are not their product."*

## LIKE A FILM SET

Built entirely from recycled frames from former productions (Comédie-Française and previous shows) and furnished with props and furniture also recycled (stock from the Odéon - Théâtre de l'Europe and Théâtre Gérard Philipe), the space resembles a film set with its visible stands and projectors.

On stage, a corridor in the background, then a large chaotic kitchen with a cold, neutral appearance, lit by a large double window and rows of laundry drying on separate lines according to which family they belong to. Stage right, a corner of a white-tiled bathroom, lit by a bare bulb, and stage left a small room with a bed and dining corner.

The space can both play with cinematic codes and project us into the 1970s Soviet era, or be completely stripped bare to reveal the artifice of today's reconstruction set, playing with theatrical codes.





# Adaptation: from Testimonies to Stage



## RECONSTRUCTING ORALITY

The challenge of adaptation is to work on life and the desire to live, not on war. We must recompose a story from these pieces of lived destinies to build a fragmented fiction in ten life journeys.

Svetlana Alexievich's voices come to us from the extreme, from the depths of human experience, bordered by the unspeakable, and they call for theater. We must assemble all these monologues, all these solitary voices, to form a collective body in dialogue.

The adaptation begins ahead of rehearsals, with three heads: Florence Seyvos, screenwriter and writer; Julie André, actress and artistic collaborator; and myself, director and scenographer. Florence is responsible for the literature and dramaturgy, Julie for the actors and the transition to theater, and I for the scenic transposition, notably the development of the set, which is done in parallel. We have already worked on these same bases for adaptations of Ingmar Bergman's *Fanny and Alexander*, Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day*, and Frederick Wiseman's *Welfare*. This collective organization aims to create from the original work a true theatrical version.

Women's war has its own language. Svetlana Alexievich's journalistic work is based on oral testimonies, but the way these words are assembled is completely reconstructed by the author to establish her own literary dramaturgy. We move from pure journalistic work to very deep poetic work. Each testimony will be scrupulously studied according to its identity, theme, war professions, singularity, then a deconstruction of the general framework will operate, and a recomposition phase will begin by breaking the isolation of sequences and reconstructing an overall structure. This new editing phase will aim to represent the work by sheltering it "under a new skin" to make it an original version. Our obsession remains that the author's work is never distorted but also not "imitated." We must be in line with the original work while taking into account that theatrical representation requires a transformation of the original material.

Documents are living beings; they must lead to change along with the progress of work over the course of rehearsals. We must be able to endlessly draw something from them. Those who tell their stories will not only be witnesses but actresses and creators.

Speech will be the main character of our production and our true object of study. Our adaptation process rests entirely on orality and its specificities, with what these women say, what they don't say, and especially how they take the floor.

I deeply believe in imperfection, hence this approach to adaptation that consists of keeping only the very essence of scenes to privilege the moment over the story. Not to give the audience how it happened, but what the individual experienced, to make it a sensible experience on stage.



# Excerpt

*We girls from the front have known our share of trials. Quite a few of them after the war, because we then had to face another war. Also atrocious. The men abandoned us. Did not protect us. At the front, it was different. You're there crawling... a shell fragment flies, or a bullet... The guys watch out: "Get down, sister!" Someone shouts that and at the same time falls on you, covers you with his body. And the bullet is for him... He is dead or wounded. I was saved like this three times.*

*The children's stores that sell war toys... Planes, tanks... Who had such an idea? It turns my soul... I never bought, never gave war toys to children. Neither to mine nor to others'. Once, someone brought to our house a little fighter plane and a plastic machine gun... I immediately threw them in the trash... Because human life is such a gift... A sublime gift...*

*You know what idea we all had throughout the war? We dreamed: "Ah! guys, if only we could live until then... How happy people will be after the war! How happy and beautiful the life they will know will be! Humans, after suffering so much, will have pity on each other. They will love each other. Humanity will be transformed."*

*And yet, nothing has changed. Nothing. We continue to hate and kill each other. For me, this is the most incomprehensible thing...*

*I teach history. I am an old teacher. During my career, history has already been rewritten three times. I have taught it from three different textbooks... I am afraid that our life too will be rewritten. For us, in our place. Better that I tell it myself... We ourselves... Don't speak for us and don't judge us...*

*But who will take over? What will remain after us?*

**Tamara, guards sergeant, stretcher-bearer**

# Rehearsals



Our rehearsals begin with self-managed collective work that serves as the genesis of our rehearsals; they symbolize the intimate journey to be made between us and the reference work: how will reality become fiction?

And then, as in documentary film-making, where one investigates extensively before sorting and editing the collected material, I rehearse enormously. Each day, we test a study where I expect the actresses to take power, a dispossession. I then position myself more as observer, analyst, which allows the actresses to collectively assert themselves in the creation. They play the embryo of the production, and day after day, this embryo develops. Not from a pre-established mechanical construction but according to a daily roadmap of group attempts. I am included, even immersed in this pregnancy. I know and don't know where I'm going. I await a manifestation whose signs I now know perfectly how to recognize. I await the metamorphosis like Louis Malle in *Vanya on 42nd Street*. Then I take the floor again.

Centered on the performer and the present moment of representation, our theater tends to demythologize everyone's place and to valorize the actor's status by defending the idea of a collective theatrical gesture. Supporting this notion of dependence and common investment in staging opens a form of infinity. The gesture constantly mutates, which also forces me to accept its imperfections.

I want to build with the team a common dramaturgy that addresses the place each character will have, will take. I insist on porosity between fiction and the present moment. The notion of reality remains linked to a form of theatricality, and if there is in my identity a dimension that resembles a cinematic gesture, I affirm, on the other hand, a very theatrical aesthetic.

In my stagings, which are silent, without demonstration, the stage is in direct contact with the world. While avoiding naturalism, it is about giving the impression that everything happens live. These are sequence shots that allow continuous play of the actresses together on stage, which induces a different connection to time. It is this vertigo of the instantaneous that I seek in my directing work, day after day... The oral material offered by *The Unwomanly Face of War* means that taking the floor gives these women a social and civic condition. By speaking, they make their stories and those of all wars no longer invisible.



# Svetlana Alexievich

## Author

*"I have three homes: my Belarusian land, my father's homeland where I have lived all my life, Ukraine, my mother's homeland where I was born, and the great Russian culture..."*

Svetlana Alexievich was born on May 31, 1948 into a family of teachers in western Ukraine.

She first worked as an educator and history and German teacher, then began a career as a journalist in a rural newspaper. Her first book, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, a collection of testimonies from female veterans of the Second World War, was published in 1985 and caused huge

controversy. The work was deemed as "unpatriotic, naturalistic, degrading" and amounting to high treason. Supported by Mikhail Gorbachev, millions of copies were sold nevertheless.

Also published in 1985, *Last Witnesses*, the war seen by women and men who, at the time, were children. *Boys in Zinc* (1990), a collection of testimonies from Soviet soldiers sent to fight in Afghanistan, was a new scandal followed by a trial. *Enchanted by Death* (1993), about the suicides which followed the fall of the USSR, was published before *Chernobyl Prayer: a Chronicle of the Future* (1997) and is still banned in Belarus today. *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2013), about the end of the USSR and what followed, was awarded the 2013 Médicis Prize. In 2015, Svetlana Alexievich was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature.

She took an active part in the Belarusian revolution of 2020, which was triggered by the last presidential election fraudulently won by Alexander Lukashenko. Threatened with arrest, she was forced to seek exile in Berlin where she currently resides.

Her books are always on the side of the individual against the *raison d'état*. In this respect, they are radically incompatible with Soviet ideology, but also with the modern Russia ideology.





## Julie Deliquet

### Artistic director



After studying film and several theater trainings, first at the Conservatoire of Montpellier, then at the École du Studio Asnières and at the Jacques Lecoq International Theater School, Julie Deliquet created the collective In Vitro in 2009 and staged Jean-Luc Lagarce's *Last Remorse Before the Oblivion* (2<sup>nd</sup> part of the trilogy "From the 70s to the present day...") as part of the Young Directors competition Théâtre 13, where she received the audience award.

In 2011, she staged Bertolt Brecht's *A Respectable Wedding* (1<sup>st</sup> part of the Trilogy) at the Théâtre de Vanves then at 104 as part of the Festival Impatience, then in 2013, *We Are Alone Now*, collective creation and 3<sup>rd</sup> part of the trilogy.

The full version of the trilogy was shown at the Théâtre de la Cité and at the Théâtre Gérard Philipe, national center for dramatic arts of Saint-Denis as part of the 2014 Autumn Festival.

In 2015, she staged *Gabriel(le)*, for the "Adolescence and Territory(ies)" project initiated by the Odéon - Théâtre de l'Europe, and created *Catherine and Christian (endgame)*, epilogue of the trilogy, at the Théâtre Gérard Philipe, national center for dramatic arts of Saint-Denis as part of the Autumn Festival 2015. In September 2016, she staged *Vania* based on Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, at the Comédie-Française. She staged *Mélancolie(s)* in October 2017 based on Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and *Ivanov* at the Théâtre de Lorient, at the Théâtre of Lorient, national center for dramatic arts of Bretagne Bretagne and the play was revived at the Théâtre de la Bastille as part. In 2019, Julie Deliquet created *Fanny and Alexandre* by Ingmar Bergman at the Comédie-Française, and made a short film, *Violetta*, as part of the "3<sup>rd</sup> scene" program of the Paris Opera, released in the cinema during the pandemic under the title *Those who sing*, alongside films by Sergei Loznitsa, Karim Moussaoui, and Jafar Panahi. This film was to be presented in the Official Selection at the 2020 Cannes Film Festival.

In autumn 2019, she created Arnaud Desplechin's *A Christmas Tale* at the Comédie de Saint-Étienne, centre dramatique national. The production was revived at the Odéon - Théâtre de l'Europe as part of the 2019 Autumn Festival. Julie Deliquet is godmother of the promotion 29 of the Higher School of Dramatic Arts of the Comédie de Saint-Étienne and created with the students an on stage-writing *The Sky Tumbles*, in June 2020.

In 2020, Julie Deliquet took up her duties as director of the Théâtre Gérard Philipe, national center for dramatic arts of Saint-Denis.

***In 2021, she created Rainer Werner Fassbinder's Eight hours don't make a day at the Théâtre Gérard Philipe, national center for dramatic arts of Saint-Denis. In 2022, she co-directed Fille(s) de alongside Lorraine de Sagazan, Leïla Anis and the actresses of the In Vitro collective. That same year, she created with the Troupe of the Comédie-Française, Jean-Baptiste, Madeleine, Armande and the others... inspired by Molière, Salle Richelieu.***

In July 2023, she presented *Welfare* at the Avignon Festival, in the Cour d'Honneur of the Palais des Papes, based Frederick Wiseman's film. Then in December 2023 she directed *An Invisible Night Envelops Us*, graduation production for the 2023 class of the Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique - PSL.

## Theater: Julie Deliquet opens the Printemps des comédiens festival with the uproar of war lived and told by women

Published 1<sup>th</sup> juin 2025



©Christophe Raynaud de Lage

**In Montpellier, the director, head of the Théâtre Gérard Philipe in Saint-Denis, adapts *The Unwomanly Face of War* by Belarusian novelist Svetlana Alexievich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature.**

Machine gun bursts, flesh torn to shreds, cracking bones, the smell of blood: when theater takes on the face of war, it needs neither images nor sounds. Just words. They're powerful enough for the nightmare to take shape. The opening of the Printemps des comédiens festival in Montpellier on Friday, May 30, was achieved through a radical artistic gesture: director Julie Deliquet made a lasting impression with an uncompromising show that follows directly in the line of her aesthetic and ethical approach to theater. By adapting and directing *The Unwomanly Face of War* (based on Svetlana Alexievich), the director of the Théâtre Gérard Philipe in Saint-Denis delivers one of those valuable knockout punches that leaves audiences stunned—but elevated.

Published in 1985, this collection of testimonies is the fruit of seven years of interviews conducted by the Belarusian novelist. Awarded the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature for her entire "polyphonic work, a monument to suffering and courage in our time," she began in 1975 to turn her microphone toward Russian women who went to fight the Nazi enemy during World War II.

Writing (and describing) war from the feminine experience had never been done, she says—never read, never seen. Long before this approach became standard in literature, cinema, or theater, long before Iris Brey's essay (*The Female Gaze: A Revolution on Screen*, Éditions de l'Olivier) theorized the necessity of telling stories from women's perspectives, Svetlana Alexievich was already breaking ground. She liberated from their enforced silence the realities and truths that men had monopolized. "They remained silent for so long that their silence itself became history," declares one of the performance's protagonists, speaking of these women soldiers.

### **A CROSS-CUT AND ALERT SCORE**

Julie Deliquet's direction transforms this silence frozen in history into a pure present whose brutality is never avoided. Two and a half hours of words that don't run but gallop from one actress to another. There are nine of them on stage responding to the novelist's questions (played by Blanche

Ripoche). All are exceptional. Julie André, Astrid Bayiha, Evelyne Didi, Marina Keltchewsky, Odja Llorca, Marie Payen, Amandine Pudlo, Agnès Ramy, and Hélène Viviers never stop "bouncing off" each other in a cross-cut and alert score where improvisation is regulated to the comma. Not showing that one is acting is a high-wire exercise. Speaking lines as if they were being born in one's thoughts at the very moment of their utterance: technique alone cannot explain this tour de force. The levels of understanding and listening must also be set to their maximum. It's an understatement to say that the sisterly chemistry works.

So we don't take long (just a few seconds) before forgetting the artifice to immerse ourselves in this reality reactivated with essential immediacy. In 1941, these Russian women were thirteen, sixteen, or twenty years old. They were snipers, stretcher-bearers, nurses, or intelligence agents. They survived four years of carnage only to be called "soldiers' whores" upon their return. Yet they shouldered more than their share in defending their country. Amputated bodies, massacred children, torture endured or inflicted, cold, hunger, filth—nothing was spared them. "We carried on our backs the mass of wounded or dead men who weighed three or four times our weight," recounts one of them. "The ideal was stronger than maternal instinct," testifies another. "We killed the fascists like pigs," remembers a third.

### **ORALITY UNFOLDS TO ACCESS THEATRICALITY**

To bring such material to life within the closed space-time of theater, Julie Deliquet accomplished a fabulous work of recomposing the original text. She aggregates, interweaves, and redistributes the multiple narratives until forming a homogeneous play. While its architecture is perhaps a bit too systematized—the journalist opens successive chapters by suggesting shared paths of reflection—its restitution is a singular concentrate of collective life that grows from the very memories of mass graves. The orality of the words unfolds to access theatricality.

This gamble was far from won, but the result is there: the anonymous crowd of these women becomes embodied in bodies, voices, hairstyles, costumes, personalities, and temperaments. First seated in a row, facing the audience, on chairs or stools, the actresses rise one by one to end up (what a symbol!) standing on their legs.

This shift toward reconquered verticality is accomplished within a scenography of assumed mess: a Russian communal apartment torn apart and overloaded with props. In the rooms (bathroom, living room, kitchen, bedroom), a jumble of objects. These traces of a precarious and familiar daily life serve as a backdrop that the actresses barely use. Only the diminishing light (stage and hall are lit full-up at the beginning) signals the stage's entry into night, the passage of time, the spreading shadows, the step-by-step testimonies that also sink into darkness.

At the end of the performance, once heroism is purged and patriotism settled, once cries of hatred are exhaled and proofs of courage proclaimed, comes what is most difficult to name because it belongs to the absolute intimate: being a woman on a war front. When it's time to speak of the disrupted menstrual cycles, of the shame felt because the body betrays, and finally and above all, of the fear of being raped, that speech seems struck by restraint. And because this restraint survived the battlefields, we understand that war truly does not have a woman's face.

**Joëlle Gayot**



# ON TOUR

→ **September 24 - October 17**

Théâtre Gérard Philipe, centre dramatique national de Saint-Denis

→ **January 8 and 9**

Théâtre National de Nice, centre dramatique national Nice Côte d'Azur

→ **January 14 and 15**

MC2: Maison de la Culture de Grenoble, scène nationale

→ **January 21 - 31**

Les Célestins, Théâtre de Lyon

→ **February 4 and 5**

La Comédie de Saint-Étienne, centre dramatique national

→ **February 10 and 11**

Théâtre de Lorient, centre dramatique national

→ **February 18 - 20**

Comédie de Genève

→ **February 25 and 26**

Malraux, scène nationale Chambéry Savoie, Chambéry

→ **March 3 - 7**

Théâtre Dijon Bourgogne, centre dramatique national, Dijon

→ **March 11 and 12**

Comédie de Caen, centre dramatique national de Normandie

→ **March 18 and 19**

Le Grand R, scène nationale, La Roche-sur-Yon

→ **March 27**

L'Archipel, scène nationale, Perpignan

→ **March 31 - April 3**

Théâtre de la Cité, centre dramatique national de Toulouse Occitanie

→ **April 8 - 10**

Comédie de Reims, centre dramatique national

→ **April 14**

La Ferme du Buisson, scène nationale, Noisiel

→ **April 17**

EMC91, Saint-Michel-sur-Orge

→ **April 22 - 24**

Nouveau Théâtre de Besançon, centre dramatique national

→ **April 28 and 29**

La rose des vents, scène nationale, Lille Métropole Villeneuve d'Ascq

→ **May 5**

Équinoxe, scène nationale, Châteauroux

# Théâtre Gérard Philipe centre dramatique national de Saint-Denis

The Théâtre Gérard Philipe, national center for dramatic arts of Saint-Denis is a place of creation, production and distribution of theatrical works. It has been directed by Julie Deliquet since 2020, accompanied by the In Vitro collective and two associate artists, directors Elsa Granat et Le Birgit Ensemble – Julie Bertin et Jade Herbulot. She wishes to share a theater where fiction plays with reality, a theater placed under the sign of creation, transmission and education. It opens its program to young artists and offers modern and popular creations. The children are not left out: throughout the season, *Et moi alors ?* presents shows for young audiences.

Outdoors shows are regularly offered and contribute to the cultural life of the territory. The TGP sees itself as a house for the artists of today and tomorrow, warm, welcoming and open to everyone.



Centre dramatique  
national  
de Saint-Denis

DIRECTION  
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