



by Dennis Foon



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For the Teacher

War examines how aggression and violence permeate youth culture. It shows four young men struggling with competitiveness, anger and vulnerability; using war as a metaphor for peer relations, athletics, popular media and relationships with women. *War* provides an excellent platform for teens to discuss the causes and effects of violence within their own community.

Note from the Playwright About *War*

*“Manhood training by its very nature creates the climate in which violence can flourish, and a society in which, despite its pious protestations, a level of violence is always tolerated, indeed expected. Boys will be boys.” – Rosalind Miles, *The Rites of Man**

I wrote *War* after going on the beat with the Vancouver Police, attending Youth & Violence conferences and seminars, speaking to social workers, youth workers, psychologists, teachers. I interviewed a hundred or so teens in public and alternate schools, group homes, drop-in centers, even two 15-year-olds who were handcuffed to chairs in the interrogation room – they’d just been arrested for beating another boy senseless.

Through these months, Rosalind Miles’s words resonated. In fact, as Miles points out in her book, the expression “boys will be boys” is actually an imperative: boys *must* be boys.

The pressure to “be a man” is universal. Boys put it on boys, fathers put it on sons, men place it on men – repress feeling, be overly competitive aggressive, invulnerable. This imperative was a common denominator linking all the males I interviewed. It skewered their ability to see themselves and the people (particularly women) around them clearly.

Bearing that in mind, I decided, for the first time, to write a play without female characters. In *War*, the women in the play are talked about and acted upon, but never seen. It’s the not-seeing I was interested in exploring, the not-feeling.

Part of that disconnectedness is how we use language to reduce, disparage and control others. That’s also the reason I chose to invent a slang for the characters, to draw attention to the way we use words as weapons. — *Dennis Foon, 1995*

Note About the Language Dennis Foon’s chose to not use actual profanity in his play, despite how commonplace it is. This was partly to avoid the shock factor, but it was to draw students’ attention to the way language can be used to degrade and denigrate others.

Asking Questions *War* offers neither a tidy, happy ending nor clear-cut solutions. Like many art forms, theatre may raise more questions than it answers. The audience members may agree on what a character said or the sequence of events, but they may not agree on the meaning of those actions. Discussion can focus on gathering opinions, making inferences and considering alternatives. Differing views can co-exist without conflict because each view enriches our understanding of the play, ourselves and our world.

At the end of *War*, the actors will remain in character for a facilitated talkback to allow students to express their feelings about the play. Teens can ask questions of them about their behavior and offer suggestions about making different choices.

This study guide includes questions for small group or full class discussion, or as writing prompts. We enjoy and respect letters or reviews from students. Have them write to us at war@cincyplay.com or mail letters to: Education Department, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, PO Box 6537, Cincinnati, OH 45206-0537.

Printed Resources

Skud, Dennis Foon. Groundwood Books; First Trade Paper Edition edition. March 3, 2004.

The novelization of the play *War*. Dennis Foon expands each character's part, alternating chapters among the teens.

The Macho Paradox, Jackson Katz. Sourcebooks. April 16, 2006.

Katz is cofounder of the Mentors in Violence Prevention Program (MVP). He asserts that rape, battering, sexual abuse and harassment are so widespread that they must be viewed as a social problem rooted in our culture, not as the problem of troubled individuals. He urges men to directly confront the misogynistic attitudes and behavior of their peers.

Guyland Michael Kimmel. Harper 2008.

The passage from adolescence to adulthood was once clear. Today, growing up has become more complex and confusing, as young men drift casually through college and beyond — hanging out, partying, playing with tech toys, watching sports. Beneath the appearance of a simple extended boyhood, a dangerous social world has developed, far from the traditional signposts and cultural signals that once helped boys navigate their way to manhood.

Video Resources These valuable videos are available from the Media Education Foundation — www.mediaed.org. The website offers summaries and video previews. Some are available in sections on YouTube. *Tough Guise, Wrestling With Manhood, The Bro Code, Boys to Men, I Am a Man, Killing Us Softly, Asking For It, Game Over, Generation M, War Zone*

Internet Resources

www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/12/04/sports/hockey/boogaard-video.html

Punched Out: The Life and Death of a Hockey Enforcer. A three-part video and series of articles about a young man raised to live a life of violence in professional sports.

www.ywca.org/site/pp.asp?c=agLGKXNOE&b=1296933

Bullying prevention resources for schools through the Cincinnati YWCA.

www.loveisrespect.org

Unhealthy relationships and what teens can do if they experience abuse.

www.teenadvice.about.com/od/violencebullying

Resources for teens experiencing bullying, domestic or dating violence.

www.teencentral.net/Search/Fudge.php?qu=violence

Answers to questions from teens about violence in their schools, homes and relationships.

<http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/violence>

The role media violence plays in youth culture.

http://www.lionlamb.org/media_violence.htm

Research on the increasing amount of violence in video games, televisions and movies.

<http://ehe.osu.edu/news/2009/violence-in-high-school-sports.php>

The growing problem of violence in high school sports.

For the Students

Before the Play

Live Theatre

A live theatrical performance is very different from watching a movie or television show. Because the performers and audience are together in the same room, they create the event together. A live presentation has not been pre-recorded, with the mistakes edited out. This makes it riskier for the performer and more exciting for the audience. Each audience member affects those around them as well as the performer. The more respect, attention and positive energy the audience “gives” to the performer, the more the performer can give to the audience.

- ▶ Use the restroom before the show begins so you don’t miss the best parts of the show.
- ▶ Turn off your cell phones so you and the performers can stay focused. When the show is over, feel free to tweet or otherwise share your thoughts with your friends.
- ▶ Listen! Theatre is about words.
- ▶ Theatre is live. The actors can see and hear you. They want you to react, to laugh, to respond. If you respect them, they will give you the best possible show.

Synopsis & Characters Andy wants to make it big in action movies. He worships Jason Statham and Vin Diesel who have become stars by playing hyper violent heroes. Tommy is in Junior ROTC with dreams of flying F-16s for the Air Force. Brad is an “enforcer” on the hockey team, with expectations that his aggressive style will earn him a position in the NHL. No one really knows Shane; he is feared by others because of his violence and a rumor that he once killed someone.

Tommy’s girlfriend breaks up with him and he suspects that Andy has been the reason for her decision. Tommy challenges Andy to a fight after school and enlists his best friend Brad to act as his “backup.” They are surprised when Shane shows up and supports Andy. Intimidated by Shane’s reputation they are frightened away. Shane and Andy develop an unexpected friendship when they find that they can help each other out. Andy wants to learn to stand up for himself and act like a “real gangster,” and in return finds Shane some work training actors how to fight.

The friendship between Brad and Tommy drastically changes when Brad is demoted on the hockey team because of his violent tendencies. This leads Brad to commit an act of arson. He takes his rage out on Tommy, taunting him about his manhood, until Tommy, in turn, attacks his ex-girlfriend. Seeking safety in numbers, Brad approaches Andy, asking if he can be friends with him and Shane.

Andy’s growing glamorization of violence is undercut when Shane is fatally wounded. The characters are left to examine how violence begets more violence and is not a satisfying solution to conflict.

A Few Questions

- ▶ This play is titled “War.” You’ve read the synopsis; why do you think the playwright chose this title?
- ▶ Think about the vocabulary of war, words such as “bomb,” “attack,” “kill,” “smash,” or “shoot.” How are they used outside of warfare? How have you heard them used in conversations about sports? About movies? About school?
- ▶ Think about the characters described in the summary. Do they sound like characters on TV or in the movies? How might they be different? How might they act like people you know?

After the Play

- ▶ What did you think of *War*? What would you tell your friends? Your family?
- ▶ Who would you recommend should see this play? Why or why not?
- ▶ What is something you remember from the play? What did you see? What did you hear?
- ▶ What do you think you will remember about this play a year from now?
- ▶ Why did the playwright use made-up language for some words?
- ▶ How would you describe each character in this play to someone who had not seen it?
- ▶ Which one of these characters was a bully? In what way?
- ▶ In what ways did the characters try to gain power in their lives and in their relationships?
- ▶ What would you say to each of these characters if he was in your class?
- ▶ What do you remember about the costumes? What did they tell you about the characters?
- ▶ What do you remember about the set? What did it tell you about the world of the play?
- ▶ What do you remember about the sound or music? How did they help the story or the mood?
- ▶ Did all of the elements of the production (story, actors, setting, costumes, movement and sound) work together? Why or why not? Did it all help tell the story?

Women in *War* The script called for four male actors. The director added a silent female character.

- ▶ Why do you think the playwright only wrote male characters?
- ▶ Why do you think the director added a female? What was her purpose?
- ▶ Why do you think she doesn't speak to the male characters?
- ▶ What was the role of women in the play?
- ▶ How did the male characters relate to women? How did they talk about them?
- ▶ How important are women in the lives of these characters?
- ▶ With the lack of female characters in the story, what does this play offer to women?

Write a Letter Imagine you are one of the women who *do not* appear onstage in this play.

- ▶ Imagine you are Sheila, writing to Tommy when he is in jail. What would you want him to know?
- ▶ Imagine you are Charlene Norris, writing to Brad when you heard that he was demoted to fourth string.
- ▶ Imagine you are Shane's mother, writing something to say at this funeral.
- ▶ Imagine you are Andy's sister, writing to him when he is off at college, telling him about life at high school now that he's gone.

Write a Review After discussing the play and its production elements, write a review. Share them aloud or post them online for other classes to read and respond to. Include the following:

- ▶ a brief summary of the story;
- ▶ a description of the production elements and a comment on how interesting or effective they were;
- ▶ comments on the actors' work and the director's skill at pulling the whole thing together;
- ▶ comments on the quality of the play itself, its importance and its relevance to an audience.

Interview Your Classmates Dennis Foon, the playwright, started his work on *War* by interviewing hundreds of young people about their history and their perceptions about violence in their lives. Interview each other on how you perceive violence in your school. Work as a class to generate a list of interview questions. Only ask questions that you really want the answer to. People being interviewed do not have to answer any questions that they do not wish to answer. Compile the interviews in a booklet for others to read.

Resources for Immediate Help

National Teen Dating Abuse Hotline

(this is connected to loveisrespect.org)

1-866-331-9474

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

1-800-787-3224 (TDD)

National Sexual Assault Hotline

1-800-656-HOPE (4673)

YWCA Domestic Violence Hotline

513-872-9259

www.endabuse.org

Lighthouse Youth Crisis Center

3330 Jefferson Avenue

Cincinnati, OH 45220

Hotline: 961-4080 for youth experiencing a crisis or who need assistance.

The Lighthouse Youth Crisis Center is Cincinnati's only 24 hour a day, 7 days per week shelter for unaccompanied youth 10 through 17 years old. They provide "safe place pick-up" (pick-up from wherever they are and transport to the shelter) for anyone age 10 – 17 who is in an unsafe situation. The center also takes walk-ins. The shelter, hotline, and pick-up service are all available 24/7.

Choose Respect

www.chooserespect.org

Coaching Boys Into Men

www.coaches-corner.org

Love is Not Abuse

www.loveisnotabuse.com

For Boys & Men

www.mystrength.org