



Discussing Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home (2016): A Conversation with the Author, James Allen Moad II

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
WOMEN OF THE IRAQ
WAR

INTERVIEW

ANDREA R. BELLOT 

VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home, a play scripted and performed solo by James Allen Moad II, premiered in Minneapolis at the Bloomington Center for the Arts on 10 November 2016. After its opening performance in 2016, Outside Paducah has been staged in other locations in the United States. The New York premiere was presented by Poetic Theater Productions in 2017 in The Wild Project Theatre in the East Village, and it was nominated for two New York Innovative Theater Awards, “Outstanding Solo Performance” and “Innovative Design,” and received an award for the latter.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Andrea R. Bellot

Rovira i Virgili University,
Tarragona, ES

andrearoxana.bellot@urv.cat

KEYWORDS:

James Allen Moad II; Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home; interview; women and war; combat trauma; U.S. home front; veterans and theatre

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bellot, A. R. (2021). Discussing Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home (2016): A Conversation with the Author, James Allen Moad II. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(2), pp. 69–76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i2.271>

Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home, a play scripted and performed solo by James Allen Moad II, premiered in Minneapolis at the Bloomington Center for the Arts on 10 November 2016.¹ After its opening performance in 2016, *Outside Paducah* has been staged in other locations in the United States. The New York premiere was presented by Poetic Theater Productions in 2017 (see [Figure 1](#)) in The Wild Project Theatre in the East Village, and it was nominated for two New York Innovative Theater Awards, “Outstanding Solo Performance” and “Innovative Design,” and received an award for the latter.

The play is divided into three acts and contains independent stories about the long-term consequences of war in veterans and family members. Set over a summer in 2007 near Paducah, Kentucky, the narratives feature three male characters: a boy whose father returns from Iraq with brain damage (see [Figure 2](#)), a father whose son from the Marines has committed suicide (see [Figure 3](#)), and a former soldier on a visit to his hometown after serving in Baghdad (see [Figure 4](#)). While the play is a one-man performance, an array of secondary characters is included by direct mention or via imagined dialogue; most of these secondary characters are also male, either military or civilian. Although the plots revolve around the Iraq and Afghanistan War, other wars, such as the Vietnam War and the American Civil War, resonate in the background since the play intends to show the pernicious legacy of war in

general and the devastating consequences to American families. The wars have been physically fought abroad, but their consequences on the American population are manifested inside the home territories—as the play’s subtitle reads, “the wars at home.”

James Allen Moad II writes short stories, poetry, and drama. Born in 1966 in Granite City, Illinois, he is a former Air Force pilot who left service in 2010 with the rank of major. At present, he serves as an English Professor at the United States Air Force Academy, his alma mater, and still co-operates as a fiction editor and blogger for their international journal, *War, Literature & the Arts* (WLA). Moad’s writings have been published in a variety of journals and anthologies, and he is the recipient of the 2014 Consequence Magazine Fiction Award.² He has also performed on stage at the Library of Congress and at The Guthrie Theater as part of “The Telling Project: Giving Voice to the Veteran Experience.” With his active involvement in community projects, such as the “Veterans’ Voices Initiative” in Minnesota, Moad seeks to teach the stories of veterans and their families in schools, colleges, and discussion groups.

What follows is an interview with James Moad to discuss *Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home*, in which we talk about his main personal and professional motivations, the purposes that drove him to create his play, his performing experience on the stage, among other issues. I met James

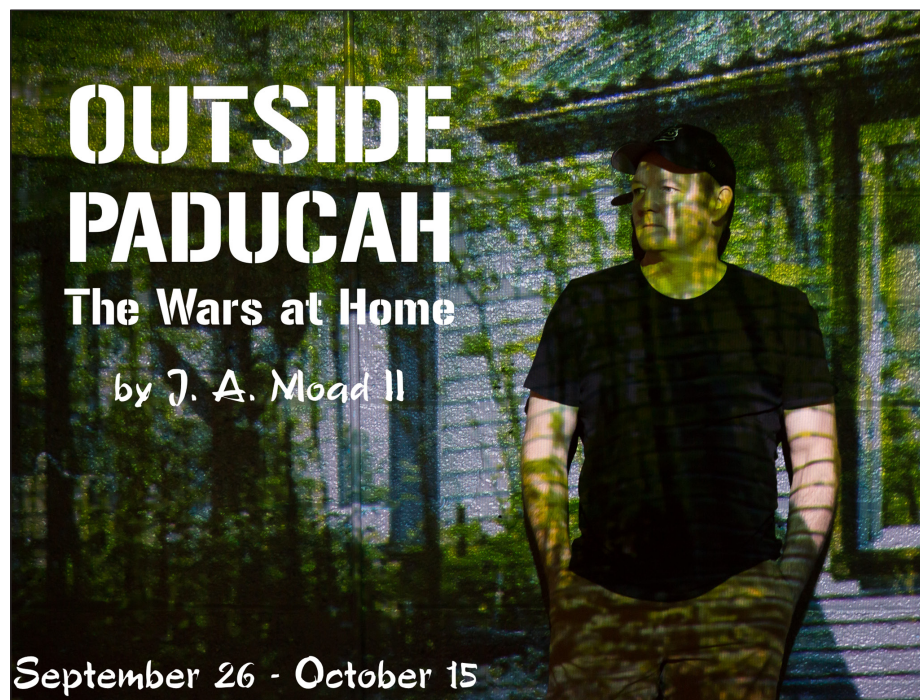


Figure 1 Promo for the 2017 New York Performance.

Note: Photo from the 2017 New York performance of *Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home*. Produced by Poetic Theater Productions. Directed by Leah Cooper. Photos by Hunter Canning. Courtesy of the Author, James Moad II.

Moad in September 2018, in Colorado Springs, at the “War, Literature & the Arts Conference: Representing and Remembering War” held at the US Air Force Academy. I watched Moad perform Act 3 of his play, which was part of this conference programme. I had the chance to talk to him briefly after his performance and get to know more about his work. After having read the entire script of the play, I was particularly interested in the way he describes the consequences of war fought abroad at home, and I thought his play deserved further investigation.

Andrea Bellot (AB): What motivated you to write the play? What was your main source of inspiration?

James Moad (JM): I don’t think of myself as specifically a playwright, but rather a storyteller. While I’ve always loved the theatre, it wasn’t my intention to write a play. A short story of mine won a contest, and I read it at Augsburg College along with a few other fiction writers. I find that many fiction writers tend to read their work in a way that is a bit underwhelming, and I’m always concerned about boring an audience, so I decided to read this first-person piece in an intense way, by embodying the character. I got a standing ovation and afterwards. An actor told me that I should perform it—that I had a gift for embodying the character. He’d been in the original cast of *A Chorus Line*, so his words motivated me to adapt another short story and write another piece to bridge the two and create a full piece with an arc and the underlying sense of unified piece of work.

AB: What is the ultimate intention of the play?

JM: I’d say to it is two-fold. First, to inform those who’ve never had any experiences with veterans or their families after they’ve returned from war. The work is meant to shed light on the often-unspoken trauma that haunts both veterans and their families. Theatre is unique in that it becomes a communal experience for those present, allowing them to effectively bear witness to the reality of those touched by the trauma of combat and recognize how it reverberates outward both inside families and down the line for their descendants. It is meant to take the audience into their lives, whether that person is as a child of a veteran, a father of one, or the veteran himself who is struggling to deal with what they’ve seen and endured. And secondly, it’s also intended to serve as an introduction of sorts—to be an honest and clear narrative meant to help inspire and shape the dialogue around these realities to a society distanced from it all.

AB: Who is the play addressed to?

JM: In many ways, the answer here is tied to the question above, but it is also to the children, family members, and veterans themselves. It is a way of recognizing the varied,

complicated, and often overlooked difficulties that they face long after they return home and take off their uniforms for the last time. These stories, and others like them, help let them know that they are not alone, that their burdens are not to be dismissed, and that their realities are being expressed. It is a stark contrast to the heroic narrative of being in combat, which most veterans find problematic and, at times, offensive, even. It is also directed toward society and to future leaders. When I speak on the subject of war (often at colleges), I’m aware that these are future leaders and policy makers, and I stress the importance of understanding the cost of war on both a personal and societal level.

AB: Why have you decided to show the consequences of war in families and not only in veterans?

JM: As a storyteller, I’m limited to the stories that find me, so it is less of a decision and more of an act of recognizing and listening to those stories that speak the loudest to me. They come in a variety of ways with the characters often speaking their own truths. I effectively become an observer as they share their realities with me, and these were the ones that came to me over time. It wasn’t really a choice, and my job is to take what they are telling me and present it in a way that expresses the truths that they are trying to impart—even if they don’t know exactly what it is—as in Act One where the young boy is trying to make sense of it all (see *Figure 2* below).

Each individual’s experience is unique, and my job is to find the main thread that connects them, while staying true to their individual characters. I could’ve tried telling each of these stories from the perspective of the veterans, but that would’ve been something entirely different. In short, I have to respect the voice of the characters that find me, otherwise the work itself unravels in a way and would likely become cliché or simply information rather than a story based on the emotional truths of those unique characters.

AB: You are a former Air Force pilot, and your father is a Vietnam veteran. To what extent are the stories (semi) autobiographical?

JM: I’ve heard some writers, scholars, and critics say that *all* writing is biographical, and while I disagree, I do recognize the way my own experiences and family life growing up as the son of a Vietnam vet has contributed to my work. Instead of those driving my writing in an autobiographical way, though, I would say that my experiences help to inform my writing, allowing me to understand the characters and the people and world around them. The sensations, imagery, and emotions tied to the place and people I grew up with are alive throughout the work, but outside of the WW II veteran mentioned in Act Two (who is modeled on my own father), there isn’t much of my real life here.



Figure 2 Scene from Act I: *Our ghosts* showing a young boy sitting outside his house trying to make sense of life once his father has returned from Iraq with brain damage.

Note: Photo from the 2017 New York performance of *Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home*. Produced by Poetic Theater Productions. Directed by Leah Cooper. Photos by Hunter Canning. Courtesy of the Author, James Moad II.

In terms of actual experiences, Act Three was inspired by an answer to a question I asked a meth addict at a bar, but it has nothing to do with me. That said, the character and his reality wouldn't have resonated with me had I not grown up in a dying steel town where those gritty and harsh realities weren't present and formative for some people there.

AB: Can you talk about the setting, both place (near the city of Paducah) and time (present time 2007)?

JM: It wasn't until I finished Act Two that I began to feel that Paducah, KY, was somehow central to everything. My parents had retired to Barlow, KY, a little town outside Paducah, which is where *The Father* in Act Two is living at the time (see **Figure 3** below).

I would spend a lot of time driving down there from St. Louis when I'd visit them. Sometimes I'd drive via Paducah and other times via Cairo, IL. Cairo—a town devastated by racism and white flight, and my imagination began to grab hold of the area. I'd always pass the town of Mound City, IL, and considering there is both a collection of Native American burial grounds and a Civil War cemetery in the town, some characters began to speak to me. Paducah sits on the Ohio River, a well-known dividing line between North and South, so the legacy of the Civil War is everywhere. The themes throughout the work are very much tied to the place, and had I not spent so much time in the area, I doubt the stories would've found me.

As for the timeframe, it was driven by Act One, which is based on a short story I published set in that year ("Our



Figure 3 Scene from Act II: *Cairo*, in which a father, whose son from the Marines has committed suicide, goes to the bank to ask for a loan to start over with his life.

Note: Photo from the 2017 New York performance of *Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home*. Produced by Poetic Theater Productions. Directed by Leah Cooper. Photos by Hunter Canning. Courtesy of the Author, James Moad II.

Ghost"). I'm not sure it's in the text, but it was definitely in my mind as I wrote it because I was thinking about it all in the context of the Great Recession in the U.S., which began in that year. The other pieces fit the timeframe, and the characters' ages and family connections needed to work in that window of time, as well. I also kept thinking that by late spring of 2007, the U.S. had already been at war for over four years in Iraq and nearly six years in Afghanistan—longer than the American involvement in WW II, and that there wasn't much fiction speaking to that at the time. There was also still a lot of denial about the effects of PTSD back then, so there was this sense of the need for the story to be grounded in that time as more and more service members were returning. We were seeing the first effects on those who'd experienced the worst of things as Iraq devolved into the ethnic fighting and the incessant attacks on the occupying Americans. And lastly, with the Great Recession, soldiers were returning to places that weren't doing well economically, and they were questioning the reasons for going to war, the insane cost of it, and what they'd been fighting for. It's integral to the challenges facing the characters.

AB: Does your play deal with the Iraq and Afghanistan wars exclusively?

JM: While the characters' lives are affected by those wars, the play is ultimately about all wars. Their stories are timeless. I could change the setting to post Civil War era, WW I, or Vietnam and literally change a few details, and these stories would work. In general, my thinking is that good war literature is that which captures the essential universal truths of what it means to go off to war and return home. It avoids clichés but speaks to the emotional truth that resonates for all soldiers and their families. There's a great quote from Sophocles' play *Ajax* which talks about the frustration of soldiers as they endure the reality of war. I use it to highlight this point when I speak on the topic. Here is the quote where I have changed a few names (the ones in bold) to make it fit for the Vietnam War:

How many years will it take for my wandering to end
and when will this relentless battle on the outskirts
of **Saigon** with its countless terrors and unending
violence finally come to an end, even if it means
America will be defeated? I wish **MacNamara**,
Johnson and **Westmoreland** had vanished or
perished before giving us **Helicopters**, **Napalm** and
Agent Orange. They have robbed me of flowers,
beers on a soft summer night and the sound of
sweet music. They have destroyed my friendships,
taken away my ability to sleep and cut off my heart
from all feeling, numbing me to love or being loved.
They have left me out in the cold waiting to die, lost
and shivering on distant shores.

AB: Since you are not a professional actor, how do you feel when you are on stage?

JM: Performing is both exhilarating and exhausting, especially for a solo performance. I had no idea what I was getting into, but when I initially performed as part of *The Telling Project*, a director told me I should consider acting someday. That idea sat with me and helped me believe it when I was told the same thing a few years later. I'm not sure how professional actors feel, but ultimately, I give myself over to the character, and they take control. I'm not always sure what they will do or how the emotion of the piece will play out. I've found that acting is more about letting go than holding on, and in my early stages of rehearsing and getting training by the amazing director Leah Cooper, I would work on things until I felt the energy in my body resonate with the emotion. It was strange, but I knew exactly when I hit the right emotional note. When I first took the stage, I would tell myself that I'd gone through the training and to let the hard work and rehearsal free me of any doubt about how I'll perform. It's not so different than flying a plane, really. I think that the level of discipline from flying helped me to recognize the flow and pattern of repetition necessary to perform at my best for a consistent time. If you have doubt, you can't land an airplane in low visibility and crosswinds, and to me acting is the same.

AB: Would you agree that women are underrepresented in the play? Have you considered including a stronger female voice to account for the war trauma from a female perspective, either military or civilian?

JM: As I've mentioned before, the stories find me, so it's not really a matter of me trying to write a character or add one that isn't handed to me from the universe. Once again, it's the emotional truth of the work that matters. The gender is almost superfluous. The little boy in Act One could be a young girl, the Father in Act Two could be a mother and the Veteran in Act Three could be a female Marine, and the emotional truth would render that character alive. I'd love to actually work with female actors to possibly do this. I'd also want to consult some female veterans, as well, though. I've worked with a lot of them in writing groups, and they have their stories to tell, and they are telling them in great numbers now. The military sexual trauma (MST) is such a pervasive thing that affects women, so that reality, layered with the PTSD and sexism, means they have and continue to struggle in a way that I can't begin to comprehend. I see a lot of them every year at writing conventions, and they are writing some amazing stuff, and I couldn't begin to do them justice. That said, in my latest play, *A Burning Good*, two amazingly interesting and different female characters are at the core of the story. They steal the show in a way I couldn't imagine when I began writing the play. Neither of them is connected to the military, but their characters

are alive in my imagination, so I know them and hear their voices, which allows me to bring them to life on the page. That play helped me to become a finalist for the 2020 McKnight Fellowship in playwriting, and the overwhelming response from readers was how well I wrote those two female characters.

AB: What else can you say about the civilian women in your play? How do you envision them and their struggles? What role do these women play in the three parts?

JM: Like any work of fiction, it's an act of discovery for the writer. We know certain things going into the project, but the characters coursing through us are pushing to be heard and to have their stories rendered in some way. I didn't plan to write specifically about the female characters, but I couldn't help but give them a voice, even if they are a nuanced one through the eyes of another character. There is so much background, and it's always a struggle to contain the work, but the civilian women are not there as simply backdrop. They are the bedrock of the story, as they often are in writing about war, and while we don't see them completely, their presence helps us to understand the true cost of war on a societal and family level.

Women bear the burden of war. They are caretakers, lovers, healers, sources of strength, unwilling victims, and ultimately, they are the ones who see things both from the outside and from within. The mother in *Our Ghost* has experienced war on two fronts. Her father served and ended up killing himself. From the first line of the play, the past is evoked... "Sometimes they go with you...." The ghost of war goes with you... as families lingering in the aftermath of the experience of war know all too well, they aren't able to just be "movin' on soon" ... They can't simply "leave that old ghost behind." The mother works to mitigate the pain on her family regarding the Ghost as it cries out in the night. Her son hears her "trying to talk it down" and being firm, saying he had "To stop it right now." We feel her strength and determination, the pain of her own father's suicide pushing her to be firm and strong by the end when she tells her son, "don't look back..." She doesn't have any answers besides that, forced to endure the struggle of a broken husband and lost home, her only choice is move forward. But we can hear the unspoken truth in the feigned optimism, "Mama said they's gonna make him all better up at the VA...." We, as the audience, know that this yearning for him to be better isn't realistic, and yet the mother has no choice but to express that hope to her son. Forced to be defiant and strong, she is the one who has to take charge, and the boy's resilience in the end is a manifestation of her own desperation...and without looking back, the cycle continues.

As a society, we don't want to recognize the true trauma of war, after all, and instead paint it as heroic and noble,

doomed to repeat the cycle because we refuse to look back and see it for what is. To me, the true tragedy of the piece is expressed by the boy when he tells us about his grandfather's suicide and that his mother has chosen not to talk about it...but as he says, "I know it's true." A child's truth is often grounded in the reality of their present experience, because it is all they know. They aren't manipulated yet by narratives that twist and reshape our understanding of war and effect on everyone. As we grow, we cling to those narratives in search for solace and meaning, but it serves to undermine our ability to engage in a dialogue with the past that will help us avoid repeating the same old mistakes. Ultimately, the inner truth of the work to me is that we never escape the ghost of war. It follows us, and the inability to see it for what it truly is eludes nearly all of us. The mother, sadly, can't avoid being a part of that process, as well.

In *Cairo*, I not only felt the characters' connection to the war, but their connection to the landscape of war. Baghdad and Cairo, Illinois, are both devastated landscapes and battlegrounds. In America, we see the aftermath of the racial war that has continued since the Civil War—one that is alive and well (as we can see in the present with all the white supremacy in America). The American South has always been awash in this racial battle since the Civil War ended, and Cairo, the literal bottom tip of the north defined by the rivers, is where that battle took place in the early seventies—as white Americans left the town rather than integrate their city. Ester has chosen to stay, hoping to be a force for renewal and good—a librarian connected to the past, and a teacher trying to shape the future. Bell remained in town without much of a choice, trapped there, making her way. Both are survivors trying to navigate a life in the aftermath of that war. Bell is strong and certain, having endured the struggle to survive in her own way. Both women embody hope, but sadly, that hope fades by the end. Bell doesn't want the Father to die on the road, and she helps him, and yet is acutely aware of what he can do for her. She is battle tested, after all, from her years of having to survive in that environment (In my musical later on, she is a key player, so I know her story in full).

We first see Ester when she runs her fingers through the boy's hair, and "it was like he come alive again." Therein' lies the hope of both a father and a teacher, but in the absence of understanding how the wars both at home and abroad will destroy him, the hope is a naïve one. He is the future, after all, and the seeds of our failed dreams are tied to that denial of the cost and reality of war. When the boy returns, the reality of the war in Iraq and the lost war at home in Cairo are his undoing. Ester passes on soon after, and Bell leaves the city.

As for "Quittin' Meth," the women's roles weren't in my mind at all when I wrote the piece. The voice of the main character was so overwhelming as I channeled him

that everything else was a side note. If anything, they are tied to nostalgia in many ways—the memory of his mother dancing and singing and working at the salon. He is working to evoke a time before his sister was hit by a car—a longing for a life that once seemed beautiful but has been devastated ever since.

Once again, we feel the war on the home front in the dying rust belt town. The yearning to go back and to have that childlike innocence that we lose along the way. The women in the bar are a manifestation of the internal decay—a metaphor for it all. There's "nothing pretty about it" anymore. They are temptations, like the eye-candy girls, who are higher than a kite and there for the picking. We can see him on the edge of "biting into the apple" before we are given the stark reminder of where that can lead by Will, who's become a meth addict trying to cope with his experience of war. The fact that he has used the young girls is ultimately that hard hitting reality that helps the Veteran see the depravity for what it is.

AB: In part 3, you describe an image of a Baghdad morgue with bags filled with body parts of kids and old women. Why have you decided to include such a disturbing image?

JM: In some ways, the veteran's glimpse into those body bags was similar to that moment when he looked at the meth addict and realized the horror of it all. He didn't understand at the time how it would affect him, but looking back, it is the moment that shaped his notion of war. As I wrote the piece, I realized one of his jobs had been to guard the morgue, where Iraqi family members would come in search of their lost ones. I imagined the horror of what it must be like to have that job, to look inside body bags—even if just to confirm identities. I decided to use it because it serves so many purposes—to show the horrific nature of war on the ground, to put us there, to help us see it through the emotional lens of the character, and to show how war touches everyone—women, children and men. And, of course, those images don't go away from those who've experienced them. They see them every day. The images do not fade, but become entrenched, and I wanted that image to stick in the mind of the audience, too, so that they could understand what he sees. I intentionally used the phrase "peeked inside body bags" because it serves to reflect a kind of curiosity for young soldiers—boys in their search for meaning and the need to assert their masculinity and prove their manhood. I could see a group of them—eighteen and nineteen-year-olds, guarding the bodies and pushing or daring each other to look inside those body bags. In my view, we all need to see inside—we, as a society—and if we can't stomach it, maybe we need to question our decisions to go to war.

AB: You raise other underlying social problems in all the stories, such as poverty, racism, unemployment, lack of resources in the VA, among others. Why have you decided to include these other topics?

JM: The world of poverty and a lack of resources are often core reasons that people join the military. It opens the door to training, pays for college tuition, and gives experience to people who may have few other opportunities. These characters have come out of those worlds, and I am merely telling their stories. So, in a way, I am not including them, but rather expressing their reality in a way that lets the audience understand them completely. It's a reflection of the society that they are a part of, and that includes the town of Cairo, IL, which is the embodiment of what the destructive nature of racism can do to a place. Each of the characters has been shaped by these harsh realities, and the military is often a means of escape. Of course, a teenager signing up to serve has no idea of what he/she might have to sacrifice to escape the world they've grown up in. In Act Three (see [Figure 4](#) below), I start off with a series of questions we might ask people before they sign up to serve. Those were taken directly from an essay I



Figure 4 Scene from Act III: *Quittin' Meth* featuring a soldier on a visit to his hometown after having served in Baghdad.

Note: Photo from the 2017 New York performance of *Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home*. Produced by Poetic Theater Productions. Directed by Leah Cooper. Photos by Hunter Canning. Courtesy of the Author, James Moad II.

published years ago on the subject, called “Questions,” and they are ultimately an expression on the personal cost of fighting in a war. Overall, I like to think of the play as an answer to those questions.

AFTERWORD

The above interview derived from a series of conversations that took place via e-mail and Microsoft Teams in July and August 2020. At that time, I was in Spain and Moad was in the US, and due to travel restrictions for the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face meetings were not viable. Interview questions were forwarded to Moad, and the answers transcribed and provided here, were received by e-mail attachment on 8 August 2020. Some additional questions/answers were added in December 2020. The text above has remained faithful to Moad’s transcribed text. I would especially like to thank James A. Moad for his willingness, generosity, and openness to discuss his thoughts. His work has been inspiring and educational for me. For more information about James

Moad and his work, please visit his webpage <https://www.jamesmoad.com>.

NOTES

- ¹ Full list of creative team: L. Cooper (Director), C. Schoenborn (Technical Director/Design), E. Belpedi (Lighting), K. Horowitz (Sound), S. Bauer (Stage Manager); E. Belpedi & J.A. Moad II (Imagery); A.E. Heaney (Costumes), P. C. Hansen (Producer). The scripts of the play were published in the same year 2016 by War-Torn Books, a publishing house founded by the writer. All the textual quotes in this paper come from this 2016 edition.
- ² For more information on Moad II’s literary accomplishments, please visit his personal website: <https://www.jamesmoad.com/>.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Andrea R. Bellot  orcid.org/0000-0002-0561-2132
Rovira i Virgili University, Tarragona, ES

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bellot, A. R. (2021). Discussing Outside Paducah: The Wars at Home (2016): A Conversation with the Author, James Allen Moad II. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(2), pp. 69–76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i2.271>

Submitted: 31 May 2021 Accepted: 01 June 2021 Published: 27 July 2021

COPYRIGHT:

© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Journal of Veterans Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by VT Publishing.