

Oh What a Lovely War - Theatre review:

Wendy Thomson 2014

I had wanted to attend a production of 'Oh What a Lovely War' for some time and I had missed the opportunity to see it earlier this year in Stratford. I knew that this show would be special and I'd read that Joan Littlewood changed the face of British theatre with the inclusion of children, politics and the working class language. (Littlewood's influence is continually being felt and another vision is being realised this October, across the UK with Fun Palaces <http://funpalaces.co.uk/>)

Scene Productions, in association with South Hill Park arts centre in Bracknell were advertising a promenade production of 'Oh What a Lovely War' set in the lovely grounds and interior of this Grade II listed mansion. I live in Reading, saw this was on locally and jumped at the chance to attend. Which you should too. As there are only four performances left.

An immersive experience, the audience are invited to participate in the production from beginning to end, and by the end I was close to tears. We are with the cast as they put on a village fete, talk to them at the stalls, watch 'Punch and Judy', toss a hoop, pose for postcard photographs, play 'Smack the Rat', have our fortunes told, drink tea, eat biscuits and cheer on a wrestling match. We are with them as the war starts and the young men are called to duty. We see blood washed from their clothes, told how many are dead or dying, read the letters they send home, walk through their trenches, sit with them in the cold and dark, sing for them to come home safe, and when they go 'over the top' they are our comrades, our brothers, our sons, our loved ones and the devastation is complete. All my minor worries and day to day troubles are put into perspective.

And that is the power of this production. Local actors (cast from regional theatre groups) bring to life the stories of real people from Bracknell and Reading who fought and died in the First World War. The 'Letters Room' contains copies of correspondence from First World War soldiers, sent to their families in Berkshire and other memorabilia such as newspaper articles about women joining the police force (previous to this women were only employed in domestic roles). I read about families destroyed, four brothers and their father all died in service and one remaining son given special permission for a temporary stay at home to comfort his bereaved mother. Buzz Yates who plays our Guide read out statistics on the thousands of deaths of British soldiers in individual campaigns, and how few the German casualties were. Such a senseless waste of these young lives. And for what? To move Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig's "drinks cabinet six inches closer to Berlin"?

We meet Sir Douglas Haig in the ballroom (played by Simon Light) flirting and manipulating his way to the top job. In this production it is a real encounter, and there are opportunities to dance with the young ladies and gentlemen of the establishment. For the upper classes the war was something to be talked about rather than experienced, an opportunity for promotion, influence or financial gain.

(un)Fortunately I am of the generation who gained more (mis)information about the First World War from the TV comedy 'Blackadder Goes Forth' than from school. Why did the First World War start? "when a bloke called Archie Duke shot an ostrich" thought Private Baldrick. To it's credit 'Oh What a Lovely War' educates as well as entertains. The threat of impending trouble is whispered at the fete by the fortune teller (Terry Quadling) and the Punch

and Judy show (James Hawley), the wrestlers embody the Triple Entente - Britain, France, Russia (Tyler Jones), and the Triple Alliance - Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy (David Gillham). Although I may never understand the reasons for war - can it ever be justified? I can empathise with the people it affects.

In the trench the young soldiers (George Hayter, Henry Dixon, James Hawley and Tyler Jones) invite us to take a seat as they go about their business in cold, dark, wet and cramped conditions. With the constant sound of explosions and gun fire they can still talk, eat, sleep, even write for The Wipers Times. They encounter the Germans who want to celebrate Christmas with them 'good on you mate'.

And while the men fight, what of the roles of women in the war? from nurses (Sarah Bouche) to domestic labourers in England and Germany (Hannah Collman, Chloe Shepherd) to Ladies (Kate Light, Lydia Markham, Chloe Murton, Amanda Saunders) to mothers and children losing the men in their family (Shelley and Mia Harrison). Women who support the war (Tracey Atkinson) to those who oppose it and petition for peace (Kim Halliday, who plays Sylvia Pankhurst). In the grounds of South Hill Park the Suffragettes campaign for women's right to vote and the audience are invited to sit on the 'womens side' or the 'mens side'.

It is outdoors that we sing for the soldiers 'Forward Joe Soaps Army', 'And When They Ask Us', 'I Don't Want To Be A Soldier' includes the lyrics "I don't want my bollocks shot away" . Sitting next to an elderly chap who doesn't have a songsheet, I am most moved when he knows the words anyway to 'Keep The Home Fires Burning'. How many young men didn't come home?

South Hill Park in association with Scene Productions presents
Joan Littlewood's Musical Entertainment
Oh What A Lovely War
by Theatre Workshop,
Charles Chilton, Gerry Raffles
and Members of the original cast.

11-13 and 17-20 July 2014 Wilde Theatre and Grounds, South Hill Park Arts Centre,
Bracknell