

## ***Get Reading - Review:*** **Oh What a Lovely War! By Caroline Cook :**

Scene Productions and South Hill Park have struck a fine balance between entertaining their audience and honouring those who lost their lives in the war

In a year marking the centenary of the start of the First World War there will be hundreds if not thousands of theatrical performances dedicated to the event, and probably a good half of those will be Oh! What a Lovely War.

The 1963 show is arguably the best-known stage musical based on war and it's bound to be on theatre programmes up and down the country this year.

But, as co-director Katharine Hurst told getreading prior to the show: "If you're going to stage it there has to be something special that makes it worth coming to see."

And so Scene Productions, together with South Hill Park and Bracknell Forest Council, have created a show which is like nothing else you're going to see this year.

An interactive, walk through performance, Oh! What a Lovely War feels more like a ride or 'experience' than a piece of theatre. Audiences move from room to room, following a soldier who guides them through different aspects of war.

One moment they sit round dinner tables in a ballroom, watching dignitaries ignore the horrors of war, another they delve into those horrors themselves walking through a cleverly constructed trench with corrugated walls and a smell of earthiness and dampness around them.

Each of the sets, designed by Victoria Spearing, are masterpieces in their own right, changing tone and atmosphere in a few paces. The production really makes the most of South Hill Park's spaces by turning it into a living set.

Movement from room to room was slick for the most part with audiences divided into three troops. One transition was a little clunky with quite a long wait to move but the cast did their best to improvise in the gap.

Before being divided into their groups the audience was welcomed into The Wilde Theatre which had been transformed into a country fair with interactive games, tea and cake, and a boxing match in the centre which turned into a stage and spelt out the start of the war. Audiences were free to wander, to talk to the characters, to try their luck on the stalls, and it all felt very interactive from the minute the doors opened.

Older children in the audience were clearly thrilled by the interactivity and there's plenty here to both educate and entertain a younger audience as well as their grandparents, many of whom seemed to feel the poignancy of the subject matter.

Katharine and co-director Kelly Taylor-Smith have struck a fine balance between entertaining their audience and honouring those who lost their lives in the war.

A room of letters, many of which were collected by Bracknell historian Andrew Radgick, was a particularly moving representation of Bracknell's war stories.

Sheets of handwritten notes hung from the ceiling and littered the floor as actor Terry Quadling sat in an old arm chair, reading the stories of those from our town who never came home.

It is fascinating to hear the stories of the Bracknell boys who went to war and it really makes it feel personal. For young people the war can be something quite mythical, something they read about but don't really feel engaged with but hearing about soldiers from their town really brings it home.

The community cast in *Oh! What a Lovely War* filled their roles wonderfully and vocal performances are spot on throughout. At times there was an element of hesitancy from the cast, not quite confident yet to really engage with their audiences comfortably, but that is likely to come with experience throughout the run.

*Oh! What a Lovely War* is at South Hill Park until July 20, and I would urge you to see it, to experience a unique and entertaining style of theatre and to pay your respects to the Bracknell boys who went over the top.