

OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR - VARIOUS CRITS

Email dated 16th Nov from Kay Rowan (NODA South East Regional Councillor).

She saw OWALW on Thursday 15th

After a very thought provoking evening I must congratulate your society on their whole community approach to your production of Oh What A Lovely War. I was interested to hear that through the community aspect you had gained a couple more recruits in addition to the Gold Class of Grayshott Primary School who undertook their parts very well. The exhibition was beautiful and very well thought out including the pre-show musicians.

The musicians equipped themselves well and the sound ideal for the size of the hall. Lizzie's singing went down well with the audience. The whole production was very well-crafted and the amount of work that went into arranging the costumes was very evident. The great advantage of this show is the opportunity it gives individuals to have a variety cameo roles. The 'accents' for the various nationalities were extremely good and sounded very fluent.

A difficult show to 'enjoy' by its very nature and content however a very thought-provoking evening which gave a fitting end to all the various commemorative activities we have been involved in.

Thank you for inviting me and congratulations to all involved in whatever role or activity. I wish you well for the remainder of the run. Made in Dagenham is a fun show and ideal to follow on from this one. I am sure all your cast and crew will thoroughly enjoy all the preparations.

Kay Rowan
NODA South East Regional Councillor

Email dated 18th November from Pauline Surrey (Regional NODA rep)

First of all let me thank you very much for the kind invitation to Oh What a Lovely War. I don't think I could ever have had such a thought provoking, interesting, informative, moving, jolly, sad, entertaining evening.

Several times I was moved to tears, not least on hearing the children singing Stille Nacht in their rather good German. All the old songs my Dad used to sing were a delight too, and also made me shed a tear or two (Roses are Blooming in Picardy especially).

To involve the whole community like that was a stroke of genius, and we read every bit of the exhibit info with great interest. I especially enjoyed the children's display of poetry. The poppy quilt was a delight, and also very moving.

Thanks again to all at the Stagers, and to the Gold Class kids, for a very moving tribute to that brave generation of men.

My review will follow in the course of this week. I am away in Norfolk with friends visiting, so it might take a few days longer than usual. You can be assured though that we were totally impressed with the performance, I can't stop thinking about it in fact.

Pauline's review received 22nd November

Oh What a Lovely War

Group: The Grayshott Stagers

Production: Oh What a Lovely War by Theatre Workshop, Charles Chilton, Gerry Raffles

Director: Heather Legat

Musical Director: Lizzie Hales

Date: Friday, November 16th

Venue: Grayshott Village Hall

Description of the Production

Premiered in 1963 at the Theatre Royal, Stratford under the direction of Joan Littlewood, this show was an instant hit and has become a lasting favourite. Grayshott Stagers decided quite rightly that it would make a very fitting show this November, as we remember the men who fought the 1914-18 war. The show takes us through the war from start to finish using biting satire, and old wartime songs, to show the cruelty and futility of war.

Front of House

A friendly reception, as always, in this Village Hall.

Theatre Ambience

The hall has a large auditorium, and a pleasant bar area, filled to the brim this year with people perusing the fascinating exhibition linked to the show, involving various organisations linked to the village, as well the local primary school children.

The Programme

We were given an excellent A4 size programme with a striking cover; a note from the Chair of the Stagers and one from the Director. The excellent cast profiles gave insight into things like family connections to the Great War, and which pieces of the show they found especially moving, or shocking, and were so interesting to read. There were details on many of the songs, and a super double page spread on various historical figures of the day. This greatly enhanced enjoyment and appreciation of the evening.

Scenery/Set/Props

A wonderful backdrop, intriguing props, which I have written about later in this report.

Lighting

Lighting was used very effectively throughout.

Makeup/Hair/Costumes

Once again, I have written about these later in the report. Very ingenious they were, and in many cases, quite zany. Joan Littlewood had decreed that as war was such a circus, she wanted the performers to be clad in Pierrot costumes, which is what we had here too.

The Production

The Grayshott Stagers provided surely one of the best centenary commemoration events there could possibly have been, for their community and for the local area as a whole. This production was REAL community theatre because not only did they involve the children from Grayshott primary school in the production, but they also put together a wonderful exhibition to accompany it, with the aid of Grayshott Heritage; photographers from the local photography club; and embroiderers from the very talented local embroidery group, and the schoolchildren too. We had therefore not only the production itself to move and delight us in equal measure, we had pottery poppies; superb poetry; moving paintings; photos; exhibits about the Grayshott of 1914-18; and a superb poppy quilt, eyewateringly beautiful. All this, accompanied by two musicians playing and singing songs from the time, which for many of us present were the songs our grandparents, aunts, uncles and parents used to sing or whistle about the house. Marvellous! A real privilege to see and experience. Why do I include details of this exhibition in my report on the show? Because it was an integral part of the evening, which really enhanced our expectations for what was to follow.

So, to the production itself. This ensemble piece gave 12 talented performers the chance to entertain us, inform us, make us think, make us tap our feet, sing along with them, laugh out loud, feel angry, sad, proud, happy too, and even shed a tear. So we the audience had considerable work to do, as well as the cast – surely theatre at its very best.

Just before the action began, we had time to peruse the amazing backdrop, so full of detail we needed that time to take it in, and enjoy it, for itself. We were able to note the props: boxes, trunks; coat hooks; umbrella stands; lacrosse sticks; brollies; walking sticks; a crutch; tunics; hats; shawls; sparkly tops – we were intrigued.

And so the circus began, ringmaster resplendent in red coat and top hat, the troupe of Pierrots milling about. As the action progressed, it became clear that the cast would be on stage throughout, to the front when they were performing, seated at the back when they were not 'on parade', so to speak. The hats, tunics, shawls and various sticks were much in evidence, then had to be placed carefully back in the right position, I guess, for when they were needed again. What a complicated operation – what careful planning must have been needed – and the fact that everything worked like clockwork (that's the way it appeared to the audience, at least!), shows the huge amount of effort, hours, and professionalism involved. And how exhausting for the cast, no chance to have a quick glance at the script to refresh their memories, totally full on, yet how exhilarating it must have been, as it all came together! Wonderful direction of course from Heather Legat.

The action takes us right through the 4 years of that terrible conflict, from the sense of bonhomie; of duty; service to their country; white feathers; Christmas Truce; self-justifying generals' reckless policies; poison gas; field hospitals; homesickness; keeping the home fires burning; cynicism; return of the wounded at the cessation of hostilities; and the silence that fell as the survivors preferred never to talk about those experiences.

All this, presented to us at such a furious pace, yet nothing passed us by unnoticed, we were able to savour many, many 'ah yes' moments. Many more too as we glanced over to the projected statistics and photos on the screen at the side of the stage. Director Heather Legat is quoted in the programme as saying: 'I love it when a plan comes together!' And this plan certainly did.

Highlights for me were many. Mary Coyte's sergeant-major, bullying the raw recruits into shape with her training regime, barking away at them at SUCH a speed! Superb! The rivalry between the generals and their snobby wives. The poignancy of that Christmas Truce played for us by children, the sound of their newly learnt German as they sang 'Stille Nacht' – an emotional moment – and exchanged chocolate bars and handshakes. The innocence and cheeriness in Goodbye-ee, WE know what to come, THEY thought it would all be over in a few months.

One felt relief at the interval, this assault on our senses needed to be internalised over a glass of wine!

The second half began. A masterstroke was Musical Director Lizzie Hales popping up from the orchestra pit curtain to give the most haunting rendition of 'Roses are Blooming in Picardy'. Another very moving moment. There were loud, rousing, sometimes jolly or ironic moments. There were quiet, thoughtful moments too, such as: 'There's a Long Long Trail', played by Paul Bailey on the harmonica, or 'Keep the Home Fires Burning', sung by Mary Coyte, or 'When this Lousy War is Over', sung by Steve Musco as he quietly played his guitar.

There was great character acting, especially in the cynical 'Grouse-Shooting Party' scene. This showed us the close relationships across the warring nations – Austrian, German, French and English discussing their in-war business arrangements and potential profits, with bizarre results: 'You mean the German chappies were caught on their OWN barbed wire?' And in the dance in the Officers' Mess, where the Best Prop Ever was employed – a tall, elaborate flower display plonked unceremoniously on the head of Richard White to enable lots of surreptitious plotting and whispering to go on in front of it.

We also had a bit of panto-like audience participation, as we were provided with the words of 'Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts'. All brilliant fun!

The final moments, though, brought us back down to earth with a bump. 'And When They Ask Us', sung quietly by the Ensemble made us remember how those brave men would rarely recount their experiences to relatives after the war – 'they'll never believe us' – the horror of it was, after all, unbelievable. Then the quiet resignation, and cynicism, and humour in 'Oh It's a Lovely War' to end it, with the falling of poppy petals from above.

Thank you, Grayshott Stagers.

Pauline Surrey

Invited crit by Ian Page

It seems that, during the last four years, everything that could be said about the Great War has not only been said but analysed in greater-than-ever detail. We have studied the convoluted politics leading to the events in Sarajevo, the early efforts by the Belgians and French along with the British Expeditionary Force to stave off the German advance, the long years of stalemate and slaughter, and the development of technologies and tactics that led to the ultimate Armistice.

That the Grayshott Stagers decided on a production of Oh What a Lovely War was, therefore, wholly

appropriate at this time of Remembrance although I could not help fearing that it might prove to be (in a wholly inappropriate word) overkill.

And yet, and yet..... this old warhorse of a "Musical Entertainment" still has the extraordinary power to stir the emotions. Whatever the somewhat outdated attitudes towards the political, industrial and officer classes it is, at its heart, a celebration of the enduring bravery, fortitude and cheerfulness of the ordinary soldier.

The Director, Heather Legat not only produced a terrific show on stage but also presented a pre-show exhibition by local organisations which included some impressive art work by the pupils of Grayshott School and ephemera and memorabilia gathered by the Grayshott Heritage group.

Pupils of Grayshott Primary School's Gold Class provided one of the evening's many memorable moments with their depiction of the Christmas Truce accompanied by their beautiful rendition of "Stille Nacht". The core cast of twelve actors, ably supported by keyboard and drums under the direction of Lizzie Hales, gave remarkable performances of multiple parts along with the exceptional choreography of set and costume changes which all took place on stage. The technical complexities (including lighting, sound effects and a screen showing photographs and some of the awful statistics of war) were accomplished with the degree of professionalism that audiences have come to expect from the Stagers.

In such an ensemble piece I feel reluctant to spotlight any of the cast, but earlier this year one of them celebrated fifty years on the amateur stage and, last night, gave us the comedy highlight of the evening. Mary Coyte's stentorian, terrifying yet almost totally incomprehensible NCO conducting bayonet drill with a wholly incompetent bunch of recruits was an absolute delight. The second half of the show led us into the darker places with the songs reflecting the Tommies' cynicism and longing for home combined with the almost fatalistic attitude towards their situation. The final scene with poppies falling, the Last Post and the whole cast singing "And When They Ask Us" was almost unbearably poignant. The Stagers should be proud of this memorable and moving performance.