

Journey's End

On 13 October 2011 a party attended a production of R C Sherriff's play *Journey's End*; playing at the Everyman Theatre, Cheltenham, as part of a national tour.

The play was originally produced in 1928 and has been performed regularly since. It is probably the best known and most accurate play about life in the trenches of the Great War.

The setting is an officers' dug out in front of St Quentin, on the eve of the opening of the great German Spring Offensive of March 1918. When writing the play, Sherriff drew heavily on his experiences as an officer on the Western Front, with the East Surrey Regiment; however, he was not in France at the time of the Offensive.

The play explores the tensions, courage, stoicism and human frailty of a group of officers, who wait expectantly for the enemy to attack. War is ever present and dominates their lives but each, in his own way, tries to find a way of escape. It should be remembered that, at this stage of the War, the British Army was largely composed of civilians in uniform – very few of the pre-war Regular Army were still serving. Sherriff's characters certainly reflect this.

The leading part is that of Captain Stanhope. The son of a country vicar, he is considered a veteran, despite being in his early twenties and having left public school only a few years earlier. He has shown courage and earned total respect but the prolonged strain of command has told on him and increasingly he finds solace through whisky. He is ably supported by Lieutenant Osborne, in civilian life a schoolmaster. A kindly, ordered man of mature years (he is known as 'Uncle'), his escape from the horrors of the trenches is via literature. His quiet acceptance of his likely fate, when asked to lead a dangerous trench raid, is one of the most moving events in the play. In contrast, Second Lieutenant Trotter is something of a 'rough diamond': commissioned from the ranks he lacks the social finesse demanded of an officer in the pre-war Regular Army, yet he is a competent and efficient officer, who loves talking of his garden at home. Second Lieutenant Hibbert is finding it difficult to cope with the strain of trench life and is experiencing bouts of neuralgia – pains in the neck and head: a condition from which Sherriff himself suffered in early 1917.

The arrival of Second Lieutenant Raleigh, fresh-faced, straight from Stanhope's former school, eager to take on the Germans, is a major event in the play. Raleigh had idolised Stanhope at school and 'pulled strings' for a posting to his unit. Stanhope is outraged at the boy's naivety and aware of his probable fate, is torn by anger and a crushing sense of responsibility for his welfare.



Amongst the supporting cast there is a bluff, no-nonsense Sergeant Major, a Colonel, anxious to please his superiors, notwithstanding the dangers this puts those under his command, and a mess orderly who, surely, was the role model for the celebrated Private Baldrick, in *Blackadder Goes Forth*. However, none of these characters can be considered a cliché.

The production had received many plaudits from theatre critics both during its initial run in London's West End and on tour. The acting was of a very high standard and the impressive set fully conveyed the claustrophobic nature of the dugout: the sound effects of the German bombardment at the end were excellent. The curtain call - the performers in tableau, in front of a backdrop of names on columns of a Memorial to the Missing, whilst the Last Post was played - was extremely moving.

It was virtually a full house for the performance we attended and it was notable that the large numbers of young people present – probably comprising school history or drama groups – gave the performance a rapturous reception, which it fully deserved. Hopefully the evening's experience will inspire some to explore the history of the Great War in further detail.

The trip was arranged by Bob Brunson, who also produced an informative handout, which gave background information on the British Army on the eve of the German Offensive, the role of the 9th East Surreys, R C Sherriff and the Great War and the history of the play's productions.

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