

Oh What a Lovely War

A play by Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop
Performed in November 1999

Black comedy strikes chord of Remembrance

IT is an odd thing, but of all the moving and solemn acts of Remembrance during the second week of November, the images that have most stuck in my mind have been those of the black comedy musical, *Oh What A Lovely War*, as presented 'in the round' by Faringdon Dramatic Society.

It was, understandably, not the slickest production you will ever have seen. But somehow that added to the poignancy, particularly of the plight of the ordinary squaddie as he struggled to come to terms with the indescribably wretched and terrifying trench warfare of 1914-18. The ragbag of uniforms, ill-fitting as they must necessarily be when begged, borrowed and adapted for an amateur theatrical, seemed simply to add to the image of hurt bewilderment of those who in reality were plucked from their humdrum but secure life home in Britain, to follow insane orders from leaders who appeared to place professional pride and face-saving above proper humane feelings for their men. What saves Joan Littlewood's original musical from rank bad taste, apart from the clear purpose of satire, is its thread of recognisable themes and exchanges (most obviously, perhaps, the famous Christmas truce between the opposing Jerries and Tommies); plus, of course, the music rooted in those real-time throat-stopping songs like 'Goodbye', 'Roses of Picardy' or

I am happy to report, therefore, that the singing in Faringdon's production was excellent. The chorus items, the trench ditties and, above all, the solo renditions all succeeded in being not only very moving, but entertaining, too. Where have they been hiding the voices of such as Lucy Walden and Jenni Summerfield? Top marks to musical director and choreographer Teresa Moon and the orchestra led by Debra Warner. The cast met the continuity challenges of a very fragmented script with considerable skill under first-time director Roger Leitch, and it was a first class team effort- backed up by some good technical support from the lighting and sound effects people. However, the audience would probably want me to pick out for special mention Lucy Walden's charmingly over-the-top evocation of *La Belle France*, the hilarious and cleverly delivered cod-French of Peter Webster at a meeting of national military minds, and Ken Brown's strutting sergeant major who, I can testify, sent a shiver down the spines of one or two ex-servicemen in the audience. But, for me, nothing can override the abiding image of those poor bloody infantrymen trying to keep their spirits up as they slithered amongst the mud, the corpses and the rats, while the strutting, pontificating general assures them that things have not been so good back at HQ, either, you know...

'Hold Your Hand Out, Naughty Boy'.

I.S

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