

Society : Faringdon Dramatic Society
Production : Over By Christmas
Date : 6th November 2025
Venue : The Elms Primary School, Faringdon
District : London District 12

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Show Report

I am grateful to Gary Field for inviting me to report on Faringdon Dramatic Society's presentation of "Over By Christmas" – memories of the two world wars in words and music. Gary himself found me to say hello at the end of the evening, and Co-Directors Heather Kent and Carolyn Taylor were kind enough to find time to talk to me about the production even as the hall was being cleared around us. I am particularly grateful to Bex Hutchings who had to put up with me sitting next to her, and helped me identify the participants in various ensembles. I take full responsibility for any misattributions which may remain, and hope that the fact I couldn't conceal the fact I was making notes while sitting in the front row didn't put off any members of the cast!

This was community theatre at its best. The company of over thirty included school children as well as senior citizens, and collectively they demonstrated that it is possible to conjure up something magical in an unexceptional school hall in November. Just about every creative decision fed into the show's success. The presentation drew on a wide variety of sources – from popular songs to poetry, from archive footage to personal recollections – which ranged from entertaining to deeply affecting. The production was performed in the round, which drew everyone into a shared experience, and dispensed with the need for much scenery. Time and place were established through projections, and through the excellent costumes which exactly captured the styles prevalent during the world wars: they had an authenticity which could withstand close scrutiny as the performers were literally feet away from the audience. The whole piece was infused with a spirit of respect and gratitude, culminating in the reciting of the names of local people who had lost their lives in the world wars, with some members of the cast recalling their own relatives. The whole evening was a powerful act of remembrance.

The structure of the piece was quite straightforward, with the First World War considered before the interval, and the Second World War following on. Within each act the elements were arranged chronologically, so a strong narrative thread was maintained, and a good balance between the music and humour, the poetry and pain, was evident throughout. The tone was set from the very beginning with just a few voices singing "Where have all the flowers gone?" like an elusive memory on a fickle breeze. Soon enough the numbers on stage grew and the singing strengthened like a picture coming into focus, and the music segued into the optimistic marching songs which came to characterise the beginning of the Great War, such as "Pack Up Your Troubles" and "It's A Long Way To Tipperary" (which the company demonstrated can be sung simultaneously).

Time for a change of pace, provided by Isla Maline performing "My Grandmother's Diary". Isla shared her thoughts with us as she wrote them down, and while she might perhaps have lifted her gaze to the audience a little bit more, she delivered her lines in an appropriately reflective way with good dynamic variation. "Stop the Cavalry", an anti-war song written by Jona Lewie and released in 1980, felt slightly out of place despite the references in the lyrics to the First World War, but we soon moved on

to “The Christmas Truce”, a dramatization of the football match reputedly played in no-man’s land on Christmas Eve 1914. Matt Wheeler and Wesley Belcher played the British tommies keeping up each other’s spirits with their bawdy humour and slightly desperate optimism while shielding their cigarettes from the chill breeze and the German snipers. And then, from out of the darkness at the end of the hall, we hear a lone German voice: Fritz, played by Andrew Slater, is calling out to the British soldiers. We witness the wary exchanges, the building of trust, the cautious approach behind white handkerchiefs, the ultimate comradely greeting of ordinary blokes fighting someone else’s war. The football itself was styled on the heavy leather, lace-up balls of the time, and the brief kick-around was followed by the inevitable bitter denials of the result – “if he thinks the Germans are going to beat the English at football!” Matt and Andrew are both capable singers, and their lone voices singing carols in that still space was a powerful moment.

Very different in concept but similarly evocative in its content was the “Letters Sketch”, in which increasing numbers of individuals read extracts from letters they were writing or receiving. It was a kaleidoscopic jumble of fragments capturing a broad range of emotions, but somehow an image emerged from the pieces, thanks in part to the sensitive underscore on the piano. “The Battle of the Somme” brought another change of mood, as Helen Barker delivered a thought-provoking selection of statistics: 20,000 fatalities on the first day – the worst day ever for the British Army – and over a million killed or injured on both sides by the end of the battle. It was famously said that a single death is a tragedy, while a million deaths is a statistic, but Helen’s quite matter-of-fact statements somehow brought out the true cost of the almost incomprehensible numbers.

Sue Ashforth-Smith then read Wilfred Owen’s letter to his mother, occasionally glancing down at the sheet of paper but mostly looking the audience in the eye. Good dynamic and tonal variation enabled Sue to really bring out the sense of building sadness and anger, and her near breakdown at some of the trigger points was sensitively portrayed. This was followed by Matt Wheeler reading Owen’s most famous poem, “Dulce Et Decorum Est”; Matt has a lovely tone and clear diction, and his reading was properly shaped by the meaning of the phrases rather than by the printed lines and stanzas as the anger and bitterness captured in Owen’s work was increasingly brought to the fore.

Verity Roberts, portraying a Red Cross Nurse, then reminded us of one of the roles that women played in the conflict with an accomplished, unaccompanied solo rendition of “The Rose of No Man’s Land”. This was complemented by “Keeping the Home Fires Burning”, which featured that curious preoccupation with spotless doorsteps. The spoken cues in this segment perhaps lacked a little sharpness as the performers had to time their entrances very precisely, but the innocent simplicity of the opening verse of the song soon built into powerful unison singing with notably accurate tuning in the upper range, and a moment of harmony at the end.

Andrea Forgione was particularly adept at looking the audience right in the eye despite being in the centre of the space as she took us through some of the critical aspects of the Treaty of Versailles, and I am sure that her use of certain phrases, such as Hitler promising the German people that he would “Make Them Great Again”, was entirely deliberate. We were given plenty of opportunity to reflect on the need to learn the lessons of history as Adam Bayliss played “The Last Post” flawlessly in front of a projected backdrop of falling poppy leaves, and the two minute silence was impeccably observed.

The second act opened with an ambitious number featuring the young people in the cast singing “Then We’ll Fight”, their unison voices meeting the challenges of the complicated melody, complex accompaniment, and a significant key change at the end. They were much more in their element in

“Susan’s Story”, responding actively to the narrative and forming some very natural groups on stage, before we delved once more into the archive to hear Chamberlain’s announcement of war with Germany on a vintage radio. Footage of fighters scrambling in the Battle of Britain was complemented by the sweeping moving-head lamps recreating the searchlights of The Blitz.

It was time for something to lift our spirits, and Vixz Edmonds provided it with a fine performance of “There’ll Be Bluebirds”, looking every inch a forces’ sweetheart in her red and white polka dot dress and white gloves. Vixz was careful not to over-project, and the song had a melancholy resonance as a result; while some of the phrases would have been even better sung through, Vixz’s clear tone (particularly in the upper range) and good diction really brought the song to life. She was soon joined by Heather Kent and Verity Roberts in an Andrews Sisters tribute act singing “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy” to celebrate the Americans joining the war. Vixz, Heather and Verity’s voices blended nicely, although it was a pity that there was little of the close harmony singing for which the Andrews Sisters were so celebrated; however, there was pleasing dynamic variation and the accompanying dance routine, packed with sinuous yet snappy arm movements, was well executed.

The appeal of the security of the army was reflected in Duncan Sinclair and Alison Morris’s performance of “I Wish I Was Back in the Army”, and they just about recovered the situation when some of Duncan’s words rather ironically went AWOL. This was the prelude to “The Floral Dance”, a musical sketch featuring most of the familiar characters from “Dad’s Army”. It was remarkable that a modest Dramatic Society was able to cast these classic characters uncannily well. Matt Wheeler captured Captain Mainwaring’s pomposity, while Duncan Sinclair, providing the piano accompaniment, caught the essence of Sergeant Wilson’s somewhat superior but laconic personality. Richard Lock channelled Corporal Jones’ boyish enthusiasm, Dave Headey found the Celtic spirit in Fraser, and Alan Taylor, as Godfrey, had a marvellous day. Andrew Slater combined Pike’s naivety with his anxiety to please with predictable results. Stupid boy.

The Home Guard was backed by the massed ranks of the women in the cast singing the song, and it was a necessary moment of escapism in the context of what followed. The horrors of The Holocaust were memorialised in an uncompromising slideshow which should perhaps have carried a warning; I expect the images of the gaunt prisoners and piles of bodies in the concentration camps, projected to a poignant piano accompaniment, will haunt the minds of the audience for a good while. Then another contrast in “Muriel’s Story”, the actual reminiscences of a local resident, delivered with terrific immediacy by Carolyn Taylor who could somehow make us feel as if she had lived through these experiences herself and that she was speaking to each of us individually.

The dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was marked by a nuclear flash, a sudden blaze of light in the lighting plot, but we were spared the harrowing imagery associated with these attacks. Sarah Nutbrown recited Jane Weir’s “Poppies” with sensitivity, showing the confidence to pause when necessary, shaping the phrases to bring out their meaning, and including plenty of light and shade in her tone and delivery. Tatum Rowley read The King’s Letter to children at the end of the war with touching innocence before the cast collectively let their hair down to celebrate VE Day.

We weren’t quite done. Heather Kent pointed out that the war to end all wars hadn’t really lived up to its billing, and that conflicts continue across the world. And then, to the accompaniment of Jayne Hoyland’s flugelhorn and the cast humming “Oh valiant hearts”, the roll call of names, and a final chorus of “We’ll Meet Again”. No-one quite seemed to know what was happening in the curtain call but it really didn’t matter.

This was a remarkable production, and a terrific achievement by co-directors Heather Kent and Carolyn Taylor who compiled the show and I suspect brought complementary perspectives and experiences to the presentation. Basic skills had been properly addressed: apart from occasional moments the cast knew their lines and hit their cues crisply, and despite the odd instance of performing straight up and down the hall proper adjustments had been made for a presentation “in the round”. Musical Director Debra Warner coaxed some very natural but accurate singing from the company as well as playing the piano with sensitivity and skill. Gary Bates compiled a powerful and unifying slide show, synchronised to the sound of a typewriter printing out the captions, and together with Ian Chandler provided an introspective lighting design well suited to the staging and the subject matter. And the wardrobe team of Jeni Summerfield, Joan Lee and Jane Cadogan sourced some excellent costumes in keeping with the eras of the two world wars. The knitted sleeveless pullovers were spot-on, the dresses, aprons and shawls were entirely convincing, the military uniforms appeared completely authentic, and the overalls and hair scarves were simply “Rosie the Riveter” brought to life. The costumes could withstand the closest scrutiny, and were complemented by similarly period shoes, boots, hats and hairstyles.

Parades and fly-pasts and civic events are all important aspects of remembrance, but this was something different. This was conflict as experienced by ordinary people. This was the story of a small community caught up in global events. This was the resurrection of ghosts from a collective past. This was a show to live long in the memory.

Andrew Walter
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7th November 2025