

# A Journey well worth making

## Journey's End

*A STAG production at St Michael's Church, Shute, directed by Elisabeth Miller  
Wednesday 28th to Saturday 31st October 2015, at 7.30pm*

For an amateur company to attempt R C Sherriff's *Journey's End* is no small challenge. The script demands eleven men, at least nine of them young, of whom many are required to express profound depths of emotion, despite the clipped and stilted language that is the mode of the exchange of the 1914-18 officer class. It is, in short, horribly difficult to cast, and that the STAG performance succeeds so well is a tribute to both the determined ambition of director Elisabeth Miller and the conviction and clarity that the all-male cast bring to their roles.

*Journey's End* was written ten years after the close of the First World War, part of a remarkable outpouring of memory that also saw the publication of Robert Graves' *Goodbye to all That* (1929), Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and Erich Maria Remarque's agonising *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929). *Journey's End* shares with these works the bitter knowledge of the horror and futility of the war, but counters it with a life-affirming insistence on the valour of the ordinary - the day-to-day, minute-to-minute heroism of unremarkable men just getting on with it, salvaging shards of humanity from the carnage that engulfs them.

Author R C Sherriff had served in the front line, dispatched to the Western Front at just 20 years old, and later severely wounded at Passchendaele: his account of life in the trenches, with its frank acknowledgement of fear and filth and failure, of unutterable tedium and barbarous stupidity, but also of small decencies and acts of compassion, all shot through with a merciless gallows humour, carries a compelling ring of truth.

The play is set in the British trenches close to St Quentin in March 1918. With a few crates, sandbags and deftly deployed greatcoats, St Michael's Church proves surprisingly adaptable to recreating the dark and claustrophobic dug-out where the officers are waiting for a German attack, but also the fragile sense of intimacy and protection it offers.

The centre of the play is Captain Stanhope, the dashing and charismatic officer beloved of his men, who can only keep his courage afloat on a tide of whisky. When an adoring younger pupil from his public school is deployed to his company, Stanhope's precarious equilibrium is shattered: the contrast between the rigger-playing demigod of just three years ago and the broken man he has become, is too painful, too shameful, to bear. With his height and swagger, his chiselled features and icy gaze, Tim Pritchard makes a persuasive Stanhope (the role first created by the young Laurence Olivier) - valiant, commanding, despairing and cruel by turns.

A harder task is that of Simon Hurst, a mature actor required to play a fresh-faced boy of 18, newly translated from the schoolroom to the 'topping' adventure of war. Hurst gives the callow Raleigh a soft, high voice and a puppyish enthusiasm that understandably makes Stanhope want to kick him. He stands transfixed in the beam of Stanhope's fury like a rabbit in the headlights. He is ignorant,

unimaginative, stupidly idealistic, utterly a creature of his class - and yet he is not contemptible. There is a sweetness in his simplicity, his frankness and his insistence on the primacy of friendship, that is ultimately transformative.

Raleigh is rescued by father-figure Lieutenant Osborne, “a dear, level-headed old thing”. (He is 45.) A man without illusions who accepts the appalling absurdity of his situation with a quiet and determined stoicism, Osborne personifies the forces of generosity, wisdom and compassion in the play. Ian Craig displays an analogous generosity as an actor: his one-to-one scenes with other characters, often intimate and confessional by nature, seem to call forth the very best from the cast. The scene in which he whiles away the minutes before a doomed attack, knowing himself sentenced to certain death, is almost unbearable to watch.

Osborne’s nemesis is the Colonel, portrayed as a dim and pompous ‘donkey’ by Richard Stenning. Equally detestable is the ‘little worm’ Hibbert, a shirker played with sniveling relish by Simon Ford. There is little sympathy in the writing for the character, any more than there is for Trotter, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant who has come up through the ranks. It would be easy to play Trotter as a clown, a simple-minded greedy-guts incapable of comprehending the horror that surrounds him. Tucker Stevens instead, invests him with a splendid yeomanly *gravitas*. When Trotter finds comfort in a scrape of strawberry jam, he is flying a flag for sanity, in the *Alice in Wonderland* world in which they find themselves. (It is significant that he disdains the book absolutely.) When he proudly shares a photograph of his towering hollyhocks, it is more poignant than the image of any sweetheart: in the midst of elemental chaos, his garden represents some kind of order; amid mud and filth and vermin, it is a glimpse of beauty, manifesting a defiant belief that there might be some kind of future.

*Journey’s End* isn’t an easy play for modern audiences. It doesn’t take a definitive anti-war stance: all the characters speak for themselves. It is rife with all the class assumptions of its time: Trotter is laughable because he isn’t a ‘gentleman’; Osborne is a heroic figure because he teaches at a public school and once played rugby for England. Yet one character speaks directly to our modern sensibilities. Private Mason, the officers’ cook, was no doubt intended as a bit of light relief. He seems to subsist without sleep - required to wake all the officers for duty, to wait on them at any hour of day or night, to deliver sardine sandwiches under fire. In this production, Raymond Seaward absolutely steals the show - bluff, imperturbable, resourceful and dirty, unmoved by histrionics yet visibly sensitive to fear and sorrow. He is the adage ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ rendered in lovable human flesh.

It is hard for us not to stand up and shout when Osborne accepts his fate, and when Stanhope fails to protect him. It is hard for us to accept century-old values of loyalty and duty. But this production tells us, simply and lucidly, how Sherriff saw it, how he lived it - and there is no mistaking its power.

*production reviewed by Ambra Edwards, 28 October 2015*