

1914: From Illusion to Confusion

Alton Fringe theatre: a Programme of Readings and Music

Wessex Arts Centre, Alton College June 27th and 28th June 2014

As with all AFT productions, the company always approach a project with sensitivity, great thought and attention to detail. One cannot fail to miss their timing to coincide with the one hundredth anniversary of the assassination of the Archduchess and Archduke of Serbia, the flashpoint which would bring war to Europe on a then unimaginable scale in 1914.

Narrated with warmth and expertise, the audience were navigated through the months of 1914 by Mike Biddiss's excellent script. Employing news archive, one learnt that the focus was not anticipating war. "Blizzards rage across Britain", "Marconi uses Wireless to Light Lamps Six Miles Away". The Wimbledon Finals occupied the minds in mid June 1914. "A midsummer murder in Bosnia was hardly surprising – the Balkans were always like that!"

The Wessex Art Centre provided an impressive and atmospheric space for the performers. Accompanied by Jane Clabon on piano, the musical arrangements led by Barbara Rayner and James Willis were chosen with great intelligence. By adding their considerable singing talents to the evening, James and Barbara carried the audience from favourite music hall pieces "I was a good little girl.", the suffragette anthem "the March of the Women" to the August 1914 rallying call to arms: "Land to Hope and Glory". With impressively chosen images (James Willis) throughout, the transportation to 1914 was complete

The readings conveyed the audience inexorably towards anticipating a war "of protracted stalemate", not one that would be over by Christmas. The poignancy was drawn out through the Soldier's song: "Where are our uniforms"? (Tune: Far, Far Away). Only those who experienced the devastated landscape could produce an altered rendition of "If" by Kipling: "you'll be a soldier, one day my son" (The "Wipers Times").

Congratulations to Mike Biddiss, Ian Dussek, Morris Hopkins and Barbara Rayner for devising such a wonderful, yet heart rending performance. Louise Dilloway (Director), ensured that the audience enjoyed a performance of terrific professionalism. Final mention must be made of the brilliant use of the Company's Ann Scott, who narrated from her own family's war time archive: "In the early days of war a rumour circulated that the Russian troops were passing through Britain.... Adding authenticity to the story was the detail that they had snow on their boots". The warm audience response to this was juxtaposed with the jarring reminder of life on the Frontline by the end of 1914, Christmas football matches and the singing of Silent Night/Stille Nacht notwithstanding.

One can only look forward to the AFT next production of Henrik Ibsen "An Enemy of the People" (27-29th November 2014, Wessex Arts Centre). With a strong following for AFT – tickets will fly, so book early!

