

1914 From Illusion to Confusion - the Year of Sarajevo

Amid all the commemorations, TV programmes and news coverage of the centenary of the start of the Great War, I am so glad that I found time to go to the Wessex Arts Centre at Alton College to see the Alton Fringe Theatre's evening of words and music about 1914. Entitled "*1914 From Illusion to Confusion*" the evening remembered the year of Sarajevo - the assassination of Archduke Frans Ferdinand.

A team of 10 readers and 3 musicians entertained the audience, putting the year of 1914 into historical context. The first months of the year showed a carefree country, concerned more about the language used by Bernard Shaw in his new play "*Pygmalion*" than the potential for the greatest conflict of all time. Indeed, as the readings showed the main concerns of Government were the Irish Home Rule Bill and the Suffragettes, who defaced pictures in the National Gallery and planted a bomb in Westminster Abbey.

As the year progressed, the assassination on 28th June, was still not seen as a major incident in Britain, but as our readers showed us was causing the Russian Tsar and his cousin the German Kaiser, to try to place themselves in the position of the innocent party on the forthcoming conflict. Their telegrams to each other provided one of the highlights of the evening

The second half took us on an emotional roller-coaster, as the illusion that this war would soon be over changed to the confusion of what had we got into. "*Land of Hope and Glory*" and "*Keep the Homes Fires Burning*", lustily sung by cast and audience, gave way to an sombre finale as the seriousness of the situation became evident. The year ended with the Christmas truce, "*Silent Night*" being sung by both sides in the trenches, the famous football match and the emotional farewell from Vera Brittain to her fiancé.

Congratulations to Mike Biddiss, Ian Dussek and Morris Hopkins, who compiled the items, to Barbara Rayner, James Willis and Jane Clabon for the musical inserts, which blended so well and to Sarah Castle-Smith, Penny Cushing, Tim Guilding, Chris Lang, Alison de Ledesma, Ann Scott and Lesley Willis, who all joined with the compilers to perform the readings. The direction from Louise Dilloway turned what could have been a pleasant evenings of readings into a performance, moving seamlessly from humour to pathos that kept the audience involved from start to finish. A most enjoyable and thought provoking evening. Thank you Alton Fringe Theatre.

David Rae