

PROSCENIUM

Not About Heroes

By Stephen MacDonald

Not About Heroes

The American Premiere of “Not About Heroes” was presented by the Williamstown Theatre Festival, Nikos Psacharapoulos, Artistic Director

Produced by special arrangement with Samuel French, Inc

Wednesday 27th June to Saturday 30th June 2018
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Not About Heroes

By Stephen MacDonald

Siegfried Sassoon..... Ben Morris
Wilfred Owen James Stephen

Directed by Richard Kessel
Stage Manager Keith Cochrane
Assisted By Crystal Anthony
Technical Assistance Charles Anthony

Lighting Operation..... Roger Turner
Sound OperationRichard Kessel

The Action

From a room in Sassoon's country house in Wiltshire, late at night on 3rd November 1932, Sassoon re-lives incidents that happened between August 1917 and November 1918. In sequence they take place in:

- A quiet corner of the Conservative Club in Edinburgh (3rd November 1917)
- Two rooms in the Craiglockhart War Hospital for Nervous Disorders, Edinburgh (August-October 1917)
- The countryside near Milnathort, Scotland (October 1917)
- Owen's room in Scarborough, Yorkshire (January 1918)
- Sassoon's room in the American Red Cross Hospital, London, and in the hospital gardens (August 1918)
- A dugout in Flanders (October-November 1918)

There will one interval of 15 minutes between Acts 1 and 2

With thanks to: University of Oxford First World War Poetry Digital Archive, Madeleine Clifford-Roper, Mark Sutherland, Anne Gerrard, Louise Hewitt and Shirley Wootten

Sassoon's Declaration against the War

I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance of military authority, because I believe that the War is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. I am a soldier, convinced that I am acting on behalf of soldiers. I believe that this War, on which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purpose for which I and my fellow soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation. I have seen and endured the sufferings of the troops, and I can no longer be a party to prolong these sufferings for ends which I believe to be evil and unjust. I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed. On behalf of those who are suffering now I make this protest against the deception which is being practised on them; also I believe that I may help to destroy the callous complacency with which the majority of those at home regard the contrivance of agonies which they do not, and which they have not sufficient imagination to realise.

Siegfried Sassoon, 1917

This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them. Nor is it about deeds, or lands, nor anything about glory, honour, might, majesty, dominion, or power, except War. Above all I am not concerned with Poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of War. The Poetry is in the pity.

Wilfred Owen, Draft Preface 1918

A Note on the Play by the Author

When Wilfred Owen was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital for Nervous Disorders in June 1917 he was suffering from shell-shock after four months in the trenches in France. It seems that his Commanding Officer equated shell-shock with cowardice. Owen was completely unknown. He aspired to be a poet but had achieved nothing of note. He was killed in November 1918. He had won the Military Cross a month before his death. He is now widely known as one of the greatest of the many British poets of the First World War. *Not About Heroes* is concerned with this transformation and how it might have happened.

The crucial event was the meeting with Siegfried Sassoon. He was a well-known acclaimed poet and a soldier of remarkable courage, who had achieved notoriety by publishing a protest against the “evil and unjust” conduct of the war. He was sent to Craiglockhart Hospital at the end of July 1917, possibly to undermine the strength of his protest by questioning his sanity. Wilfred Owen nervously introduced himself about two weeks later. They had little in common but a warm and loving friendship developed. Owen described it fully in his letters but Sassoon waited until 27 years after Owen’s death before he expressed his feelings in *Siegfried’s Journey*, and even more in the manuscript notes for that book. The friendship seems to have been the key which unlocked Owen’s genius as a poet, I also believe, from the tone of Owen’s subsequent letters, that it liberated the man.

This story of their friendship is told almost entirely in my own words. The play is neither a compilation nor a documentary. While I have not intentionally falsified any of the known facts, the Letters and the Memoirs leave considerable gaps which I have bridged with scenes based on ideas suggested by the available sources. I have used phrases from Owen’s letters (and frequently linked sections from several of them to form a single letter) but there are no surviving letters from Sassoon to Owen. The Sassoon letters in the play reflect his feelings and opinions at the time, but they are not his words.

Sassoon’s Diaries for 1915-1918 were published after the play was written, but I have not found it necessary to revise the play in the light of what they reveal. On the contrary, they have sometimes confirmed

conclusions I had drawn from other evidence (eg the death of David Thomas in March 1916). But the diaries covering the period at Craiglockhart and the last meeting seem, unfortunately, to have been lost.

Sassoon decided on several occasions that he would write a memoir of Owen but clearly found the prospect too painful. I believe that the inevitable guilt of the survivor was something he had to live with throughout his long life. He was a deeply reticent as well as a turbulently emotional man, and I hope I have respected his reticence. My motive was to try and understand how a relationship, which remains at heart mysterious, could leave such an indelible mark on the literature of their war – and so on our understanding of war itself. My best hope is that Not About Heroes might refresh the memory of who these men were and what it is they had to tell us.

*Stephen MacDonald, 31st March 1986
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Stephen MacDonald

Stephen MacDonald was born in 1933. He grew up and trained as an actor in Birmingham. After years of accomplished and acclaimed acting, MacDonald also took up directing. He directed at the Leicester Phoenix, and then became Artistic Director at the Dundee Repertory Theatre, and then the Edinburgh Royal Lyceum. He was highly committed to developing new plays, and almost half of the two theatres' productions during his tenure comprised new writing.

As well as acting and directing, MacDonald wrote successful stage and radio adaptations, including *The Jungle Book* in 1979. His most famous and successful play is *Not About Heroes*, which was first performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1982. In this first production he played Siegfried Sassoon, opposite David Learner. In 1983, it toured to the King's Head Theatre in London, was adapted for Yorkshire TV and BBC Radio 4, and published by Faber. In 1986, a new production at the National Theatre commemorated the centenary of Sassoon's birth. Over the next decades he continued to write, direct and act, and died of leukaemia in 2009.



Siegfried Sassoon, 1916

Image © Cambridge University Library / The Siegfried Sassoon Literary Estate



Wilfred Owen

Image © English Faculty Library, University of Oxford / Wilfred Owen Literary Estate

Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967)

Siegfried Sassoon was born in 1886 in Weirleigh in Kent, and studied at Marlborough College and the University of Cambridge. He left without a degree, but published nine pamphlets of poems between 1906 and 1912. He enlisted as soon as war broke out, and was commissioned as a second lieutenant with the 3rd Battalion, Royal Welch Fusiliers in May 1915. In November he went to France, and to the front itself in March 1916. He received a Military Cross for his bravery in a raiding party in May, and was invalided to Oxford after contracting dysentery later that year. His disillusionment at the war had started to develop, and he met and talked to pacifists such as Bertrand Russell. Upon his return to France in 1917 he was wounded and sent back to England where, encouraged by Russell and others, he wrote his 'Declaration against the War'. His friend the poet Robert Graves intervened, fearing that Sassoon would be court-martialled, and after a sympathetic hearing, he was sent to Craiglockhart to be treated for neurasthenia. He returned to France in May 1918, but was shot in the head in June. Although he recovered, he did not return to

fight before war ended that November. He continued to write and publish poetry throughout the war and afterwards. His son George was born in 1936, during his short marriage to Hester Gatty. He received a CBE, an honorary fellowship from Cambridge, and an honorary degree from Oxford and died in 1967 at the age of 80.

Wilfred Owen (1893-1918)

Wilfred Owen was born in 1893 in Oswestry in Shropshire, and grew up in Birkenhead and Shrewsbury. Unable to afford university, he worked as a lay assistant to the vicar of Dunsden near Reading, and a teacher at the Berlitz School of English in Bordeaux. In autumn 1915 he enlisted in the Artists' Rifles, and after training in Hare Hall Camp in Essex, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant with the Manchester Regiment. He was posted to France at the end of 1916. After several harrowing months in Serre and St Quentin, he was diagnosed as suffering from shell shock and sent to Craiglockhart, where he worked on the hospital journal *The Hydra*, met Sassoon, and worked on his poetry. After his recovery, he was posted to France again in August 1918. He was killed in action near Ors on the 4th of November, the news of which reached his family on Armistice Day.

RIP John Gobey (1921 – 2018)

John Gobey, who died earlier this year, was a member of Proscenium for more than 60 years. Actor, director, Artistic Director, poet, John was a key member of the group from the 1950s until the 2000s. During this time he directed and acted in countless productions, by writers as diverse as Pinter, Shakespeare, Chekhov, Tennessee Williams and Brendan Behan. He wrote Proscenium's first constitution, which is still in use more than 50 years later, built a fascinating archive of Proscenium material, and was heavily involved in local arts initiatives in Harrow. After moving away he continued to follow Proscenium with interest, and to write his poems to the very end. A renaissance man with a fine sense of humour.

Programme Sources: Feelgood Theatre Productions - Not About Heroes Education Guide (2014). Photographs of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen are from The Great War Archive, University of Oxford (www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/gwa)



Our Next Production

King Charles III

By Mike Bartlett

Queen Elizabeth II is dead. After a lifetime of waiting, her son ascends the throne. A future of power. But how to rule?

Drawing on the style and structure of Shakespeare, Mike Bartlett's controversial 'future history play' explores the people beneath the crowns, the unwritten rules of our democracy, and the conscience of Britain's most famous family.

"Bold, brilliant and unstoppably entertaining... an intelligent, empathetic, moving look at the power and limitations of the modern monarchy... theatre doesn't get much better than this"- The Times

Directed by Anton Jungreuthmayer
31st October to 3rd November 2018

7:45 pm, Compass Theatre, Ickenham
Box Office : 01895 250 615

About Proscenium

Proscenium was founded in 1924. Since then, the aim of this experienced group has been to present classic and contemporary plays to as wide an audience as possible. Since 1990, performances have taken place at the Harrow Arts Centre and, more recently, at the Compass Theatre, Ickenham.

The company meets three times a week in Harrow for rehearsals, so that four plays are presented in each season. Social, fund raising activities and play readings take place throughout the year.

Secretary : Ben Morris
Chair : David Pearson

Contact us at www.proscenium.org.uk