

★★★★★
'RIVETING'

The Telegraph

★★★★★
**'A STAGGERING
ACHIEVEMENT'**

Daily Mail

★★★★★
**'UNIFORMLY
EXCELLENT'**

The Times

SEBASTIAN FAULKS'S
BIRDSING

Stage Version by
RACHEL WAGSTAFF

**THERE IS NOTHING MORE
THAN TO LOVE AND BE LOVED**



**EDUCATION PACK
2024/25**



IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT THE SHOW

Age Guidance: 15+

Content Warnings: Contains nudity (above and below waist (excluding genitals)), sexual content (simulation of oral and penetrative sex), strong language, themes of war, death and violence and references to abuse.

More detailed content guidance is available upon request.

Running Times: Approximately 2hrs 55mins in total, including three acts and two intervals.
(Act one - 45mins | Int one - 20mins | Act two - 50mins | Int two - 10mins | Act three - 50mins)

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SECTION ONE – CREATIVE TEAM INTERVIEWS

The Adapter – Rachel Wagstaff

How would you describe the skill of adapting a play or novel?

I suppose you have to understand and find the heart of the novel. What is it about this work to which you - as a reader, as a fan - respond? And then you have to transpose it, by turning it into a play, which lives and breathes in its own right and requires no knowledge from the audience of the original work, but remains utterly faithful to the spirit of it. In practicality, that means tough decisions, such as which characters to keep, which ones to elide, and which ones to lose; which episodes to dramatize; and in which order to tell the story. Sometimes something that works really well on the page doesn't work at all on the stage. You have to be ruthless when necessary, but never alter for the sake of altering. I apply the Sebastian {Faulks} test. Would he approve, understand or even notice? If he doesn't or wouldn't object, then perhaps we're okay!

You clearly love this book. What is it that you are most keen to preserve and present in the play script?

The reason Sebastian wrote it. You can really sense the writer who went to France and was appalled and deeply moved by all those symmetrical, matching white graves. The quiet beauty of it all, which of course belies the horror of what so many went through. How can human beings have allowed and justified so much suffering? And how can we have allowed it to happen again, only twenty-one years later? Reading the novel made me begin to understand what it might have been like for an individual caught up in such an extreme historical episode. I wanted to bring that to life on the stage; to re-tell those stories which we must not forget.

Where did you start when tackling this novel?

I read it about five times, taking copious notes each time. I then went through, making a detailed breakdown of every event, every character choice, and every great line. I then put the book away and tried not to refer to it again.

Are there other practical, perhaps theatrical challenges that you had to consider when creating this draft?

I was deeply aware that to do justice to the characters, we would have to narrow down the extensive 'cast list' from the book. By trying to cram in every character, how could an audience member ever get to know anyone, care about anyone, let alone differentiate between them all? There was also the practical consideration of cost. No producer wants a cast of thirty. I had to think about which characters were essential to Stephen's story, and how many of these parts could be doubled with other similar parts, to make interesting thematic points, as well as saving money and making the whole piece more viable to produce! Another major headache: how to create tunnels onstage. I decided to leave that problem to the director...

How many drafts of this have you written, and how do you know when it's finished?

No idea. At least one hundred. I realised the other day I first approached Sebastian seven years ago. I can't believe I'm still rewriting it. It's still not finished. I am still getting notes or finding things that need work.

Speaking to people who have read the novel, they all have a bit they treasure, a moment of poignancy. Do you?

The letter Jack receives from his wife to tell him that his son has died. It still makes me cry. And the extraordinary description of the first day of the Battle of the Somme. Oh, and the moment when Michael Weir goes home. And Stephen's epiphany in Norfolk. And the birth of Elizabeth's child. I still very much admire this book, don't I?

What advice would you give to young people wanting to become writers?

Write. Read, watch, and listen. Devour fiction. But above all, write, for as many hours, days, and weeks, years as you can. Writing is a skill, a craft, and I'm certainly still learning, but you only get better by doing it. Never give up but get a job in the meantime as, unless you're exceptionally lucky, it does usually take years to get anywhere....

Preservation is a theme throughout this story. Preserving life, a way of life, a love, and sanity even. What things in your life would you be most keen to preserve?

Family; friendships; integrity. In this industry, it seems difficult to preserve any of these, let alone all three!

ACTIVITY:

Try taking a chapter or small section from one of your favorite novels and turning it into a scene from a play. Think about who speaks and what they say? What needs to be said that is hidden in the author's narrative and who is going to say it? Do you need to bring in other characters from the novel into this scene?

Start by asking yourself some simple questions about the chapter and write them down.

- Who is in this chapter?
- What do they know at the start of the chapter? What do they know by the end of the chapter?
- What does the reader know by the end of the chapter, that the characters might not?

Remember what Rachel says about finding 'the heart of the novel' She says 'What is it about this work to which you - as a reader, as a fan - respond?

Try doing this as a whole class exercise. You must all read the same chapter. Take Rachel's example from above. She says, ***"I read it about five times, taking copious notes each time. I then went through, making a detailed breakdown of every event, every character choice, and every great line. I then put the book away and tried not to refer to it again."***

After you've read the chapter several times, put it away and try to turn it into a short scene. You'll be amazed at how different all your scenes will turn out, based on your own individual interpretations.

[The Designer – Richard Kent](#)

What drew you to the project?

The historical significance of the time was a huge draw for me to this project. It's such a complex time in history, and whilst full of tragedy, it's so visually rich. It's a visual language everyone knows, and I wanted the challenge of finding a way to distil that for the stage.

How do you start to work on the design for a project like *Birdsong*?

I always start my design work with the director, and the first questions I ask are how do we want to approach this, and what experience should the audience have? In this instance I felt strongly that I wanted to abstract the world and landscapes. There are many locations, and the themes of the play are so huge it felt like the only way to create the world was to do so by boiling everything down to its core elements. Whether that was the materials, the colour palette, textures or the atmosphere.

I started this process by looking at imagery from the front line, and then pairing the images with paintings and drawings of the time. Abstract art was in its infancy at the time but there are surprisingly modern looking works by Kazimir Malevich and Olga Razanova which were a huge inspiration.

I was also heavily influenced by aerial images of trench layouts and the ravaged and charred remains of trees in the battlefield. There are a huge number of references I used that will never make it to the stage, but they all help built a palette of what the staging can look and feel like.

Do you approach the design differently for a project which is an adaptation from a book?

For this play I did all the design work only referencing the script. I then went back and looked for small details to pull from the book to help fill the world. This mostly relates to the costumes.

The book had some wonderful moments describing people and places, and that helped build the detail needed to make the world feel real. Once we had found a format that would work with the script, I could indulge all the nuances.

Do you have any favourite moments or achievements in your career?

I've been lucky to work on some amazing projects, both big and small. I'm very proud of the large-scale outdoor Shakespeares I've designed in Singapore. Most of all I love the variety of my job. Shows can range in scale from intimate two-handers to epic productions with a huge cast and setting. I like the extremes of challenge that difference brings.

How and where do you carry out any historical or geographical research for the period being represented?

The research I did for *Birdsong* was mostly through books and, of course, online. There are some brilliant documentaries which helped paint the broader picture of the global conflict.

I also made a trip to the Imperial War Museum and Army Museum in Chelsea to indulge in all the amazing artefacts from the time.

I was also able to call upon the expertise of Tony Green our historical military advisor, especially about the uniforms, weapons and tools used in the trenches.

How do you work on your designs? Do you prefer hand drawn design, or do you work on computers too?

I start with very loose sketches but more and more I start my process using CAD (Computer Aided Design). On a tour it's essential to know the show will fit in all the different sized venues. So, I like to work out the parameters for that and then work backwards inserting my broad concept. There is nothing more frustrating than having an idea that doesn't work after you've fallen in love with it.

Which other members of the creative and production team do you work with most closely?

My initial process always starts with the director. We are usually the first to build the visual language based on the script.

I also work closely with the lighting designer. This relationship is essential as good lighting can transform the stage in ways scenic elements can't. Working closely is key so that the style of both design elements work in harmony and complement each other both aesthetically and practically.

All the creatives are key to building the show, we provide a piece of the jigsaw.

What are the biggest challenges of staging this production?

The scale of the topics and locations covered is a challenge. The physical size of the western front just cannot be conveyed on stage. As well as the themes at a global and personal level, there were a lot of stories and thoughts to juggle.

Practically you have to give a lot of thought to how a set will tour. Working with the builders and production manager is essential as some ideas just aren't practical when the show is moving once a week. My approach to a design might well be very different if it was a show running for a long time in just one venue.

Do you have any favourite elements of the design?

I like how we have managed to create a space that changes with the story. I knew I wanted a set that could transform slowly over time, but with meaning. As things get more dire, and war takes over everyone's lives the set becomes more and more stripped back. I hope that helps to provide a backdrop that is more than just scenery, but a little part of the story too.

How did you get started as a Designer?

I was very fortunate to have a great art teacher at GCSE level that suggested it to me. I looked into what it entailed and immediately knew it was perfect for what I loved to do. I knew very little about theatre but was drawn to all the different elements of the work. The variety of skills you need and the types of production you can work on really appeals to me.

ACTIVITY:

Take the scene you created in the previous exercise and now try to imagine a design for it. Ask yourself some simple but important questions:

- Where does the scene take place?
- When does it take place? (For example, what period in history?)
- What things are needed in the scene to aid the actors and what things are for effect?

Richard says that directors will often work with him to create a “visual language” for the script, this very often will involve gathering lots of pictures for ideas.

Search the internet for pictures that best suit the images in your head. You could take photos of materials, rooms, places and furniture. Make a mood board that charts the colours, materials and location ideas that you might have over a period of time.

A lot of designers work this way and it helps with creative thinking. It may have surprised you to find out that some designers can't draw and so they use mood boards and computer design instead. The process isn't about your ability to draw; it's about your creativity and your ability to communicate those ideas.

Once you're happy with the decisions you've made, get the whole class to present their designs.

You could ask your teacher to be the director then he/she can question each of you about the designs.

It sounds quite scary, but this is what designers have to do all the time.



A model box of the design for the 2024 production of Birdsong, made by Richard Kent

The Military Adviser – Tony Green

Like many 'backstage' roles in theatre the key achievement of a good military adviser is for their contribution not to be noticed. If the audience, which may well include subject matter experts on a specific period or having served in the forces themselves, can simply enjoy the story and performances then my job is, more or less, done.

Essentially a military adviser helps to ensure that the specific nuances of a soldier's actions and instincts are visible in the actor's performances on stage. It doesn't matter if the play is set in the trenches of the Somme or the deserts of Iraq, there are certain points that make an actor 'look and feel the part' that I can help the cast with. This might be something basic like marching, or the correct times to salute, or even how they wear their equipment and carry their weapons. The actors on stage need to be able to make these sorts of things appear to be second nature. This is often more than just training and muscle memory – it's also about the 'why' of an action being just as important as the 'how'.

My approach is to firstly read the script and note anything that the cast may need to take some time to learn. This would be things like marching or weapon handling. I may also pull some notes together on the likely background of the characters or how their daily routine as soldiers might run. I would then look at a list of 'essentials' and 'nice to haves'. Rehearsal schedules are tight enough without adding, for example, a two-hour class on the stripping and assembly of a pistol if it isn't required in the script.

Lists established, I will discuss with the director any points and try to get some time in the schedule to cover off the essentials and as many 'nice to haves' as possible. I will also work with wardrobe and other departments in covering off the 'feel' or the period and enable the costumes to be worn 'correctly' – as an example – there is nothing more distracting than a character on stage who is supposed to be a seasoned soldier wearing a beret that looks like he first met the thing that morning.

Then it's all about structuring the educational side so that it's engaging and concise. This might be through physical activity with a whole cast 'parade', leadership exercises or chatting through the theory with individuals such as the background to the battle or conflict their character is involved in. Sometimes a director might want the full 'sergeant major' experience for the cast where I shout at them and bark orders. That can give a little more depth to some of the training but is largely for fun. On occasion, and to reinforce the 'military culture' I may also issue 'punishments' for members of the company who make a silly mistake or lose a piece of kit. In the case of *Birdsong*, I usually use 'trench biscuits' which I have made to the actual recipe of those that real soldiers had in the first world war. After eating one of them the actor rarely repeats their crime.

Probably the most important thing is to earn the trust of the cast as a subject matter expert, so that they feel comfortable to ask me anything. I must also earn the trust of the production team that I won't put my hand up to raise a point on accuracy unless it's absolutely necessary. Budgets, time, and even a director's 'vision' may all impact the amount and level of military or historical accuracy in a production and while we would all like to get everything as correct as possible there are some battles you are always going to lose.

Historically with *Birdsong* this hasn't been an issue...

But there's a first time for everything.

SECTION TWO – THE ROYAL ENGINEERS

'Sappers', 'Clay Kickers', 'Moles', 'Sewer Rats'. Whatever name you may have heard, these often-forgotten brave men of the Royal Engineers spent the war in near total darkness, crawling through tunnels they dug by hand, in constant threat of being blown up by enemy explosives; asphyxiating on natural gases and the gases given off as a result of explosions; getting buried alive by the collapsing earth; drowning in the accumulating tunnel water; or gun fire and hand to hand combat with the enemy in cramped underground battles. The things that happened to Jack Firebrace, Captain Weir and the rest of the tunnelers in the novel and play, really happened.



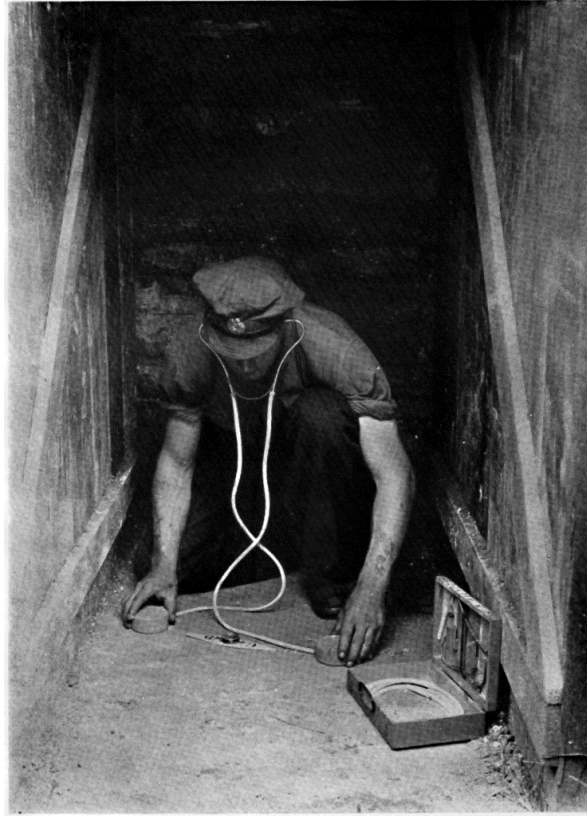
Image of an actual German trench

25,000 men were recruited to dig beneath the enemy lines during WW1. These men were mostly civilians recruited from the mining communities throughout Britain, but as mentioned in *Birdsong*, because of their expertise other useful professional subterranean workers were employed such as sewer and London Underground tunnelers. The idea was to dig beneath no-mans-land and under the enemy trenches to blow them up with high explosives.

By 1915 the British realised that Germans were mining to a planned and more advanced system, and thought that it was essential that they had a counter attack. Even though the British had trained engineers, there was no core team, so recruitment became a priority. The plan was to employ experienced miners to make the tunnels safer, and to quickly make up for lost time. The recruitment was aggressive. Posters were put up outside mines, offering financial incentives that were often much better than their regular pay. Those first regiments were under trained. There are stories of miners leaving their jobs and being on the front-line battlefields less than a week later!

The name 'Clay kickers' refers to a mining technique. The miner would sit up against a wooden support facing the wall and dig away the earth with small tools. They would pass the dirt back to be bagged up and removed. Can you imagine the hard work needed and the conditions that they had to endure? Even though it was possible to stand in some of the tunnels, the majority was only big enough to sit up in and many allowed only a single line of men to crawl through. It was often hot in those tiny claustrophobic conditions and although the miners were used to similar conditions back

home in coal mines, their professional soldier colleagues who were enlisted to help them were often devastated by the experience, describing the 'suffocating hell' and 'crushing darkness'.



Using a Geophone

Whether they were underground 12 or 20 metres, the only things the miners could see by candlelight were the tunnel walls and the faces of their colleagues. They relied on their hearing. In fact, listening carefully could be the one thing that saved their lives. Other than the noise of the surface shelling that must have shaken the tunnel walls as well as their nerves, they were listening for the enemy. German tunnelers could be digging beneath them, above them - in fact all around them. There was no clever heat sensing equipment in 1915, and so the men would listen for the sound of digging, crawling, talking and even breathing! Stethoscopes and other simple metal listening devices would be placed against tunnel walls, everyone would fall silent and hope that they would hear the enemy before the enemy heard them. At those moments the men would probably say that they didn't know which was louder - the outside sound of the bombing or their hearts beating hard inside their chests.

If enemy tunnels were located, the men would pack the walls with explosives, retreat and light the fuse in the hope of killing the enemy and destroying their tunnels. Often the two opposing sets of tunnels would meet and there would be a fight to the death underground. During the years of stalemate along the Western Front, the Germans and the Allied forces used the tunneling tactics in order to break the deadlock. At the Battle of Messines in 1917, British tunnellers placed 455 tons of explosive in 21 tunnels. It was an enormous undertaking. The enemy positions were not that far away but 21 tunnels took more than a year to prepare. The huge explosion killed 10,000 Germans. It was described as the biggest explosion in the world. So many of those men that worked under ground never saw light of day again. The battles, tunnel collapses and explosions meant that they are to forever remain beneath the fields of Northern France and Belgium.



Tunneling Officers

ACTIVITY:

Imagine and explore the conditions underground. Mark out narrow passageways on your drama classroom or hall floor with coloured tape.

Now create a scene using some of the information contained in the descriptions above. Work in groups in different tunnels, making sure that one person is the clay kicker, mining up front and the others behind are removing the earth in bags.

As if you are actually in a trench trying to avoid detection, remember to do all of this silently, as a mime.

What happens when one person needs to go ahead of another? How do you cope? What happens when a message needs passing on to someone ahead in the tunnel? Remember that noise was kept to a minimum in case of nearby German tunnels. Do you have to create a sign language or is it too dark in your tunnel? How close to you have to be to whisper?

Try the same exercise but this time with two competing tunnels close to each other. In groups, pretend to be two opposing forces silently tunneling.

Once you are comfortable with your job or action in the tunnel, wear blindfolds so that your sense of hearing becomes more focused. Listen out for the opposing group of tunnelers. How do you feel when you hear them? What do you do? Pretend it is a game of 'grandmother's footsteps' and stop when you hear a noise. Only continue mining when it's quiet again. This exercise should help you understand the conditions and it should focus your attention on the small detail of the life underground. Only when your team is working well should you attempt to add any real dialogue.

SECTION THREE – LETTERS AND MEMORIES

So much of *Birdsong* is about memories. It talks about remembering a love, a life, a better time. Sebastian Faulks describes these memories, both good and bad, with such vivid colour.

The majority of young men who fought on the battlefields during the first world war had never been out of their own country before, and now found themselves sat outside, exposed to the freezing cold and baking heat in unsanitary conditions surrounded by death and destruction.

The one thing they would look forward to was the arrival of mail. The words written from loved ones would keep them connected to the lives they once knew. Although the war had become a new reality, the letters helped remind them not just of people but of the world they once inhabited. It reminded them of a humanity that still existed and that they were fighting for. It reminded them of the small details that had made up their home lives.

As the landscape around them was being destroyed and becoming increasingly featureless, the colour, vitality and features of their own lives were treasured in memories.

The letters below are from the novel. Here Sebastian Faulks has imagined the letters that are written by the soldiers to their loved ones back in Britain. It is the night before they are instructed to leave the trenches and go into battle - going 'over the top' as it was known.

Michael Weir

Dear Mother and Father,

We are going to attack. We have been making preparations for some days underground. My own unit has been involved and we have now done our bit. Some of the men have volunteered to help as stretcher-bearers on the day. Morale is very high. We expect that this push will end the war. It is unlikely that many of the enemy will have survived our bombardment.

Thank you for the cake and the strawberries. I'm glad the garden is such a joy to you. We certainly all enjoyed the fruit. I think often of you both and of our quiet life at home, but I ask you not to worry about me. May your prayers be with the men who will go over the top. Thank you for the soap, Mother, which I assure you was put to good use. I was pleased that your evening with the Parsons was such a success. Please pass on my sympathy to Mr. and Mrs. Stanton. I have only just heard about their son.

I am sure I paid the account at the tailor's when I was on leave, but do settle it on my behalf if i am mistaken and I will repay you on my next leave. Don't worry about me, please. It is warm enough here. A little too warm if anything – so there is nothing further i need, no more socks or pullovers.

*From your son,
Michael*



The Somme, as it exists today

Tipper

Dear Mum and Dad,

They sent me back to join my pals and I am so proud to be back with them. It's a terrific show with all the bands and the men from other units. Our guns are putting on a display like Fireworks Night. We are going to attack and we can't wait to let Fritz have it! The General says we don't expect no resistance at all because our guns have finished them off. We were meant to go over yesterday, but the weather was not so good.

The waiting is awful hard. Some of the chaps are a bit downhearted. That fellow Byrne I told you about, he come up and told me not to worry. I'm pleased to hear Fred Campbell has kept safe so far. Good show.

Well, my dear Mum and Dad, that's all I've got to say to you. Tomorrow we will know if we will be seeing each other again one day. Don't worry about me. I am not frightened of what is waiting for me. When I was a little lad you were very good to me and I won't let you down. Please write to me again, I do like so much to hear the news from home. Please send me a couple of views of St. Albans. Give my love to Kitty. You have been the dearest Mum and Dad to me.

*From your son,
John*



The bank of the River Somme today

Jack Firebrace

Dear Margaret,

Thank you for your letter. My words cannot say how sad I am. He was our boy, he was the light of our life.

But dear Margaret, we must be strong. I worry about you so much, what it must be like for you. There are things here to take my mind off it all right.

I believe it was God's will. We would have kept him, but God knew best. Do you remember how he used to chase the dandelion seed down the canal and the funny words he had for things he couldn't say when he was a baby?

I think about these things all the time and God is merciful. He has given back to me memories of him when he was a little boy; lots of little things have come back to me. I think about them when I lie down at night and they are a comfort to me. I imagine he is in my arms.

His life was a blessing to us; it was a gift from God. It was the best gift we could have had. We must be thankful.

Tomorrow the men are going to attack and I think we will win a big victory. Soon the war will be over and I will be home to look after you.

*With love from your husband,
Jack.*

ACTIVITIES:

Have a go at writing some responses to the letters. Choose one of them and imagine being a parent, brother, sister or partner.

There are no TV's. There are not even any accurate newspaper reports about what is happening on the battlefields and so what would you want to know? How would you feel about being so far away from them? Read carefully about the things that they mention about their lives back home. What are they asking about? What would they want to hear?

Think about your life - where you live and the people you know. What and who would you want to know about? What would you miss and what is important to you? Pretend you are far away from home and write a short letter to a friend or relative asking about all those things. Be specific.

Look at the detail in the things that Michael, Tipper and Jack mention. They thank people for cake, strawberries and soap. They mention Fireworks Night, pictures of St. Albans, gardens, fruit and 'chasing dandelion seeds down by the canal'.

Think of the colours, feeling, sounds, smells and tastes that are contained within those words.

These are the things that have been lost to the soldiers thanks to the dehumanizing nature of war. Write a list of all the things that go into making your life. The experiences you've had, the places you know, the things that you own.

Now create a senses chart and see how many senses the things in your list touch upon. For example, I would say that my dog is very important to me. He often smells like mud and wet grass. He's soft and warm to touch. He has a loud deep bark and is a deep brown colour. Try doing this with all the things in your list and perhaps display it like this:

My life	Smell	Touch	Taste	Sound	Sight/colour
My dog	Like mud and wet grass	Soft and warm		Loud and deep	Brown
Walking by the beach	Salt			Gentle waves Seagulls Children	Yellows (sand) Blues/green (sea)
Chocolate cake	Sweet, rich	Sticky, soft	Sweet, sugar, cream		Brown, white,

When you see your life broken down this way, you can begin to see the evocative elements that go into building our memories.

Try to take this information and make a colour map of your life. Count up how many times each colour is mentioned in that column and fill a piece of paper with blocks of each colour making sure that the one mentioned the most gets the biggest block. I wonder what that predominant colour says about you? The artist Pablo Picasso went through a period where he only painted using the colour blue because he felt that the colour dominated his life due to his depression. He had turned the feeling of sadness into a colour.

Now use the abstract sounds, colours and tastes to produce some creative writing.

Use your chart to write a poem. How does your life taste? What are the favorite sounds of your life? The Australian Poet Dorothea Mackellar wrote a beautiful poem describing how the colours of all the things in her life have 'steeped my soul in colour'

COLOUR by Dorothea Mackellar

*The lovely things that I have watched unthinking,
Unknowing, day by day,
That their soft dyes have steeped my soul in colour
That will not pass away -*

*Great saffron sunset clouds, and Larkspur Mountains,
And fenceless miles of plain,
And hillsides golden-green in that unearthly
Clear shining after rain;*

*And nights of blue and pearl, and long smooth beaches,
Yellow as sunburned wheat,
Edged with a line of foam that creams and hisses,
Enticing weary feet.*

*And emeralds, and sunset-hearted opals,
And Asian marble, veined
With scarlet flame, and cool green jade, and moonstones
Misty and azure-stained;*

*And almond trees in bloom, and oleanders,
Or a wide purple sea,
Of plain-land gorgeous with a lovely poison,
The evil Darling pea.*

*If I am tired I call on these to help me
To dream -and dawn-lit skies,
Lemon and pink, or faintest, coolest lilac,
Float on my soothed eyes.*

*There is no night so black but you shine through it,
There is no morn so drear,
O Colour of the World, but I can find you,
Most tender, pure and clear.*

*Thanks be to God, Who gave this gift of colour,
Which who shall seek shall find;
Thanks be to God, Who gives me strength to hold it,
Though I were stricken blind.*

The characters in the story are always trying to hold on to their individuality. Not only had they been removed from their lives and families, but they were dressed in the same uniform, issued with the same kit and ate the same food. Steven Wraysford's sense of self is even more vague as he has no established family life that he remembers. Have you ever asked 'who am I'?

An interesting way to start this discussion is to try The Bull's Eye game. Get a piece of flip chart paper and draw a big circle. Inside it draw a slightly smaller circle and finally inside that, draw a third smaller circle. It should now look a bit like a dartboard. Using sticky notes write down all the things that make you - you!

Write down all the things that are important to you and the things you hope for in the future. Write one thing per note and place the notes in the outer ring of your 'dart board'. Next, examine what you have written and see if you can narrow that list down to a 'top 6'. Move those six sticky notes into the next inner ring on your dartboard. Then, if you can, narrow that list further to the top 3 things that define you the most. You might find it difficult. It's a really good way of starting a group discussion about yourselves.

Now try a similar exercise but as a group. See if you can list all the things that make your school what it is. Or your city, town or village. When you've got down to your top three, bring all the groups together with their top three and see if you can come to a consensus about what should be your whole class top three defining attributes.

These young men believed they were fighting to preserve a way of life. They were fighting for their families, their countries and of course for the lives of their friends and colleagues who fought alongside them.

What things in this world do you think are worth preserving now? Are there issues that you care passionately about? They might be big things that concern the whole planet and everyone on it, or you might have smaller but equally important concerns that relate to your town, your family or your friends.

Can you rank in order those things that are worth preserving in your life? Is that even possible? Share these ideas with other people in your class and see if you can find others who have similar lists. Why not get together with other people with similar ideas and see if you can think of ways that you can come together to help support your shared cause?

When people come together with a cause in which they believe, they can be a powerful force.

SECTION FOUR – THE TRUTH AND NOTHING BUT...

Propaganda [*prop-uh-gan-duh*]

Noun. Information, ideas, or rumors deliberately spread widely to help or harm a person, group, movement, institution, nation, etc.



An example of a propaganda image

We are so used to seeing and hearing from modern wars. Our 24-hour news networks broadcast live from war zones, the soldiers are often provided with cameras and the power of instant messaging and a host of other social networking applications allows for immediate updates and reaction.

During the First World War there were no mobile phones or household televisions. The only war news that civilians would receive would be the letters written by the soldiers, which were heavily censored to prevent the leaking of delicate tactical information, and also from official Government sources via newspaper or news reel. The trouble with the Government stories was that they weren't always accurate.

In an attempt to hide bad news and deflect the enemy from getting hold of battle information, special propaganda departments would alter, leak or give false information to the news agencies. The country needed more and more men to sign up, so the horrid conditions were kept away from the general public. Instead, colourful recruitment posters showed well fed and happy soldiers willing their friends to come over to join the march to victory. Often the huge losses were suppressed too. Artists were commissioned to paint pictures of the happy and brave men outnumbering the enemy.

It was the powerful stories of personal experiences from the front line that started to give a more honest account. Soldiers such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. Both had written poetry before the war, but it was for their work written during the war that would make them celebrated throughout the world. In stark contrast to the patriotic writing and state sponsored propaganda, poets and other artists like Owen and Sassoon created powerful works that described some of the horrors of which they had first-hand experience.



Another propaganda image – they often used bold and simple instructions

ACTIVITY:

Compare the colourful poster and the soft toned painting to the words of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen in the poems that follow.

Make a list of all the methods that the artists are employing to affect your reaction to them. What sort of things do the painting and poster want you to feel?

See if you can find examples of how these methods are still used today by modern advertising to affect your reaction to products?

Look at the poems and think about how the messages of suffering would be communicated from today's war zones. Choose one poem and study it.

Try to compress the message and the meaning into a 280-character post on X (formerly Twitter). Which bits do you focus on and which bits do you leave out and is the impact affected?

Choose one of the poems and see if you can turn it into the modern-day language of a TV journalist's report and perform it.

Think about where the reporter has obtained the information. Is some of it directly quoted from a soldier? Did he or she witness it? What does changing from the reported facts to the first-hand information do to the impact of the story and how does it affect the listener?

Dulce et Decorum est.

[To a certain Poetess]

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the clawing flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge,
Helping ~~the worst amongst us~~ ^{Dragging the worst amongst us}, who'd no boots ^{all}
But limped on, blood-shed. All went lame; ~~half~~ blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tires, outstripped fuf five-mines that dropped behind.

Then somewhere near in front: Whew... fup... fop... fup...
Gas shells or duds? We loosened masks in case -
And listened... Nothing... Far rumouring of Krupp...
Then ^{smarterly} ~~sudden~~ poison hit us in the face.
Gas! GAS! Quick boys! - And ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets, just in time.
But someone still was yelling out, and stumbling,
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.

Dim, through the misty panes and heavy light,
As under a dark sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight
He lunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

The Redeemer.

Darkness: the rain sluiced down; the mine was deep:
It was past twelve on a mid-winter night,
When peaceful folk in beds lay snug asleep.
There, with much work to do before the light,
We lugged our clay-soaked boots as best we might
Along the trench: sometimes a bullet sang,
And booming shells burst with a horrid bang.
We were ~~all~~ ^{& drenched} soaked and wretched, every one;
Darkness; the distant wink of a huge gun.

I turned in the black ditch, loathing the storm;
A rocket fizzed and fell to a steady ~~flame~~ ^{glare} glare,
And lit the face of what had been a form
Stumbling in murk. He stood before me there;
I say that it was Christ; stiff in the glare,
And leaning forward from his burdening task,
Both arms supporting it: his eyes on mine
Stared from the woeful head that seemed a mask
Of mortal pain in Hell's unholy shine.

No thorny crown, only a woollen cap
He wore, — an English soldier, white and strong,
Who loved his time like any simple chap, —
Good days of work and sport and homely song.
Now he has learned that nights are very long,
And dawns a watching of the windowed sky:
He has renounced all happiness and ease;
And dimly in his pain he hopes to die
That Brumagem be safe beyond the seas.

DIED OF WOUNDS.

His wet, white face and miserable eyes
Brought nurses to him more than groans & sighs:
But low and hoarse and rapid rose & fell
His troubled voice: he did the business well.

The Ward grew dark; but he was still complaining,
And calling out for 'Dickie': "Curse the Wood!
"It's time to go; O God, and what's the good?—
"We'll never take it; and it's always raining."

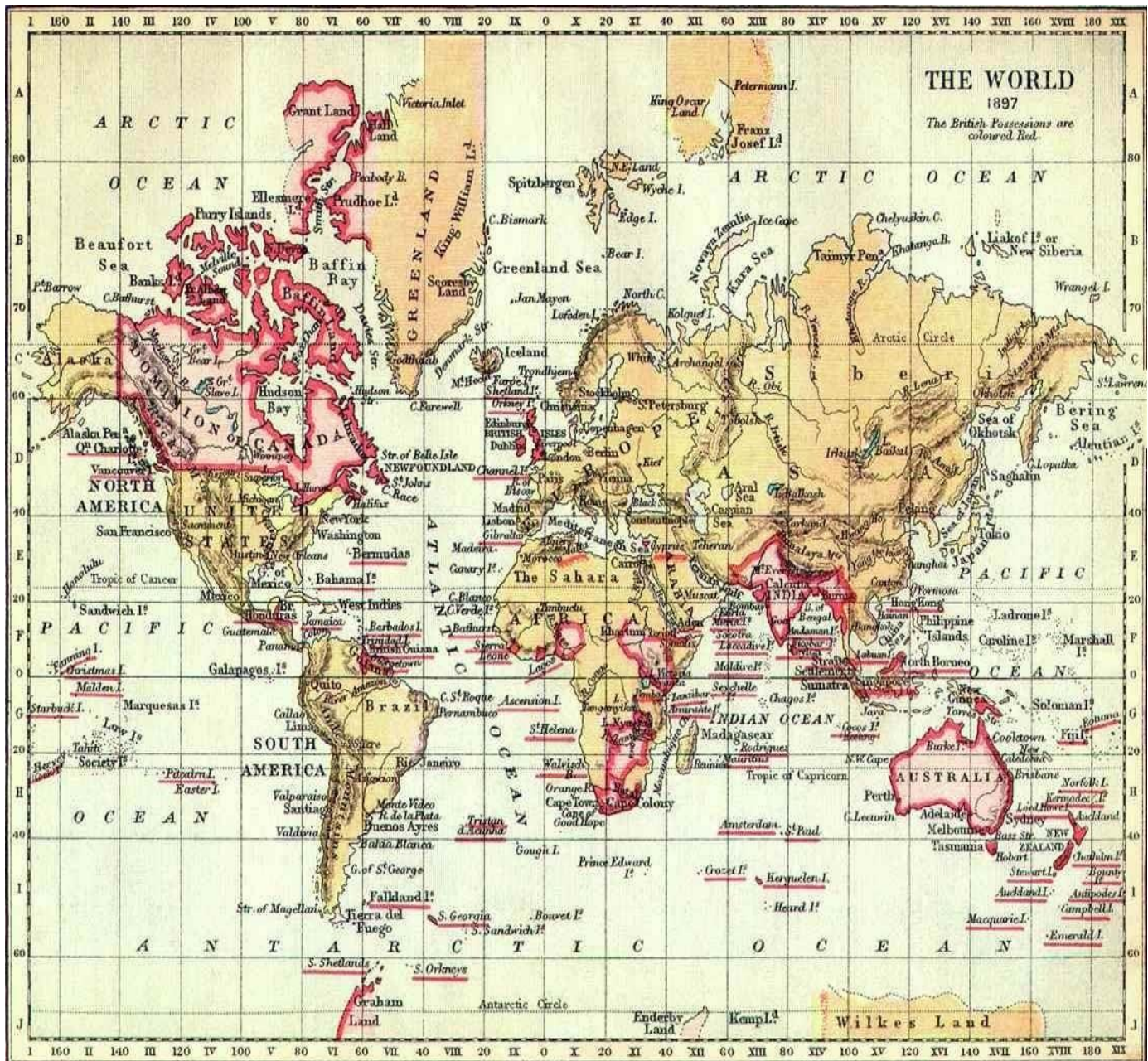
I wondered where he'd been; then heard him shout,
"They snipe like hell! O Dickie, don't go out...."
I fell asleep... next morning he was dead;
And some Slight Wound lay smiling on his bed.

S.S.

SECTION FIVE – THE WAR OF WORDS

The war of 1914 - 1918 was known as 'The Great War' or 'The War to End All Wars'. These words were used to strengthen the resolve of the soldiers and keep the public spirits high. But what's in a word? You'll be surprised to know that a lot of words and expressions used today were invented in the trenches of that war.

In the early 1900's there were no package holidays, no jet setting trips around the world. Travel between the towns and cities was considered expensive for most people. As a result, people were not widely exposed to other cultures, other languages or other classes. The war changed all that. All of a sudden, soldiers from around the British Empire were fighting together.



Men of different nationalities, class and religions were meeting. Working class men like Arthur Shaw and Jack Firebrace were in constant contact with higher class gentlemen probably for the first time. In this coming together, accents were heard, stories were shared and new words formed. A lot of it was new slang - ways of being able to talk in a secret code away from the earshot of the Generals.

However, so much language was created simply to fill the void. These men were having new experiences and dealing with equipment and techniques never before used. Here are some examples of words that were created:

SWIPE - Most of the English-speaking world uses this now to describe stealing something, but it came from a slang word that the Canadian troops brought with them.

LOUSY - we use this now to describe anything that is simply not very good. However, when the soldiers said they were 'feeling lousy' they really meant it. It referred to the lice that infested their uniforms.

SNAPSHOT - This is probably used now mostly to describe holiday photos, but actually came from a term that meant to quickly aim and fire a rifle, not a camera!

SHELL SHOCKED - we say this now to mean any experience that has left us shocked, but it was a real and horrible condition that a lot of soldiers experienced. Their nerves were shattered by the sound and impact of the exploding bombs and large gunfire all around them.

In fact, there are hundreds of words that were created by the mixing of these men. Thanks to the French influence 'souvenir' replaced the word 'keepsake' as the more popular expression. The word 'binge' familiar only to Lancastrians at the beginning of the century was spread across the English-speaking world. The lucky soldiers that were able to return to their homes took more than just the friendships and painful memories. They took back new words and phrases to their countries and communities.

ACTIVITY:

Do some digging for other words that have come from the trenches. You'll be amazed at how many there are and how easy they are to find.

In groups think of the language you use now. What words do you say that older people don't use. Try them on your teacher to make sure. For instance: the word 'cool' was first used by young people in The United States in the 1960's. Since then, 'rad', 'boss', 'mint' and 'bad' have all been created by young people to mean the same thing. How many of those are still used now? Once you've written your list of modern slang phrases and words see if you can create a short scene using as many of them as possible.

Think about why you create new words. Just like the soldiers in the early 1900's, you are experiencing new things - things not available to people before you. There was no X (Twitter), Facebook, TikTok or even texting when your parents were at school. Think about how many words that have been created by people of your age that are related to the computer age. Could you perform a speech written entirely in text speak? Try to write one and then read them out loud. Do they make any sense as spoken words?

William Shakespeare created over 10,000 new words and phrases that we still use today. Often, he would put two words together to create a new expression, helping him create better pictures inside the audiences' heads. For instance, he invented the expressions 'worm-hole' 'hot-blooded' and 'watch-dog'. Try creating your own new expressions by bringing together two words.

SECTION SIX – ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We hope that this pack has already given you plenty of inspiration for activities and exercises that you can use to enhance your experience when watching the play and learning more about the history surrounding the piece.

Original Theatre is proud of the educational work we do, and always happy to expand our offering wherever we can – if there are any additional resources you would be interested in asking about from us, please contact us with your query and we will do our very best to help.

Examples include:

- Copies of printed materials such as scripts, flyers, posters and programmes
- Digital media materials such as production photos and trailers
- Video calls and interviews with creatives involved in the project – Rachel Wagstaff is available to discuss adapting, via zoom with your students, for example

You can contact us via info@originaltheatre.com or **01284 598 025**

Digital Media Assets – as of 20/08/24

Birdsong Flashmob – London King's Cross Station

https://youtu.be/PCkpXjChqMA?si=T_g7S-18XAb9fRYI

Birdsong Flashmob Behind the Scenes

<https://youtu.be/Z6HwXjMAyzw?si=dFcrZqLHk-ew7mVh>

Max Bowden and James Findlay – I Would That The Wars They Were Over – Charity Single

https://youtu.be/w_GrOj87T-8?si=tkDZ-iahmBuutVEi

Birdsong Teaser Trailer

https://youtu.be/HhgGw_fhBSA?si=DY3pM7QoTsX81dDY

James Esler and Charlie Russell – Photoshoot Behind the Scenes

<https://youtu.be/mJUxg5F7FkE?si=gc0y7ZMukkBtRck9>

Max Bowden – Photoshoot Behind the Scenes

<https://youtu.be/fNeer-t5wMQ?si=E52vkPnmPL4izsSi>

Production website – www.birdsongplay.com

This Education Pack recompiled and updated by Emma Martin and Aaron Weight – September 2024

Original Theatre – www.originaltheatre.com