

Guild's Lovely War! unexpectedly soft
Gary Smith
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Oh, What A Lovely War! is the sort of show you used to see on the end of a British pier. Not quite Musical Hall, not quite Burlesque, it is a sometimes vulgar, sometimes raucous evening undercut by an ultimate revelation of sadness.

At least that's what Joan Littlewood's 1963 Theatre Workshop production ought to be like. Instead, it is being given new and dubious life in another Workshop, that of the Hamilton Players' Guild, where it wears its heart too prominently on its sleeve.

The joy of Littlewood's entertainment, if you can call a musical revue about the horrific waste of war remotely joyful, is the way music, satire and reminiscence coalesced into a powerful whole; a remarkable observance of both the patriotic jingoism and the sad reality of war at the front.

Well, director David Williams has put a different spin on the show, choosing to see it in the direst and darkest terms that are remarkably at odds with Oh, What A Lovely War's! satiric intentions. Williams obviously has a feel for his subject, but unfortunately it's the wrong feel.

There is no bawdy irreverence in the songs sung, many of them created by men at the front, facing their own mortality. There is none of the circus color and bumptious pizzazz of vaudeville, that might make the show less turgid. Instead, we get polemic.

Fashioned from facts, ditties and heartbreaking ballads, Oh, What A Lovely War! ought to be rather savage, excoriating entertainment, leavened, or better yet shot through with a wry sense of fun. In the Guild's slow, sprawling production it is unfortunately something less.

In truth, you have to wonder whether it was a good idea to choose such a sophisticated, hard-edged entertainment for a company of largely raw recruits. There are times you wonder if some of the cast have more than rudimentary knowledge of the lines they speak.

More spirited than anything else this sincere production strides its way across Eileen McAnuff's effectively spare, battered brick stage set, seeking some tougher point of view. The performers work best when there is a slapstick sort of invention, or when the entire company is on stage strutting out a rouser like Row, Row, Row.

Staging is largely limited to straight lines ranging the perimeter, or exuberant if repetitious marches. The punctuation of scenes and musical numbers with a droning litany of war facts is a tiresome, overworked effect. And ersatz British accents do little to evoke an appropriate tone.

There are few remarkable voices in the cast, yet several do stand out. Lyla Miklos' plaintive Hush Here Comes Another Whizzbang is a moment of nostalgic recollection. And Jack Gibb's mood-drenched They Didn't Believe Me closes the second act on a sombre and heartbreaking note.

Don Malena is suitably gruff as a stiff-upper-lip drill sergeant, Jamie Freeland has a few good moments as a sardonic master of ceremonies, and Barbara and Christine Forsyth make effective cameos of most everything they do.

Oh, What A Lovely War! is somewhat dated from the vantage point of 1995; not that its theme will ever seem dated in a world where peace remains a precarious balancing act. But Littlewood's organic, studio theatre approach to the material is so '60s that it lacks the cutting edge of more contemporary anti-war plays such as Speed Of Darkness or Pavlo Hummel. Its strength, not surprisingly, remains in the nostalgic canon of its songs. Roses Of Picardy, Keep The Home Fires Burning, It's A Long Way To Tipperary -- they typify the trust, bravery and sacrifice of those valiant souls who fought in the trenches more than anything Littlewood and her cronies dredged up from news headlines. All the more reason then to wonder why this Guild production has expunged so many of them.

For all its brave attempt, this Workshop Oh, What A Lovely War! is unexpectedly soft, hopelessly sentimental where it ought to be savage, genial where it ought to be angry and overwrought.

INFO BOX

WHAT: Oh, What A Lovely War!

WHO: Players' Guild Studio

WHERE: 80 Queen St. S.

WHEN: June 8-9-10

INFO: 529-0284