

Oh, What a Lovely War



“The truest account ever given of the 1914-1918 war” – A. J. P. Taylor

**by The Theatre Workshop
and Joan Littlewood
from a radio play by Charles Cilton**

– *A Playgoer's Companion* –

The show

Oh, What a Lovely War is an epic musical originated by Charles Cilton as a radio play, and transferred to the stage by Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop in 1963. It includes some scenes adapted from *The Good Soldier Svejk* by Czech humorist Jaroslav Hasek.

The question of how the show came to be what we have is long and complex. According to Derek Paget, "The prevailing notion . . . was that all aspects of production, including writing, were essentially collective -- part of a process in which, for the overall health of the enterprise, the

contribution of the individual was not to be over-stressed. At Stratford East, it was not only necessary for actors' egos to be sacrificed to the common cause - writers' egos had to be sacrificed as well." It was "primarily a work of editorship, not authorship. . . . it was not unusual to work in this way: indeed, it was part of Theatre Workshop's tradition." One actor said, "The fact that we didn't have a script didn't deter or worry us.



Stratford East

We always had two scripts or no scripts. That's how we always tackled things, it seems to me!" Littlewood, according to Paget, "always liked actors to do their own research and make their own input to the compositional process. She also intensely disliked 'dramatizations of history'; this was one reason why two early scripts were rejected. What she wanted was a secure research-base from which to launch a sustained practical experiment."

The show is a satire on World War I (and by extension against war in general). The title is derived from the music hall song "Oh! It's a Lovely War." In the original production, harsh images of war and shocking statistics were projected onto the backdrop, providing a contrast with the comedy of the action taking place before it. It has been described as "a company-devised montage of the First World War that loosely follows the conventions of a seaside 'pierrot show,' a turn-of-the-century British popular theater form. (A Pierrot is "a stock character of pantomime and Commedia dell'Arte. His character in postmodern popular culture is that of the sad clown. The defining characteristic of Pierrot is his naïveté: he is seen as a fool, always the butt of pranks, yet nonetheless trusting.) – adapted from Wikipedia and Derek Paget's "'Oh What a Lovely War': the Texts and Their Context."

Joan Littlewood

After rejecting the training she received at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Littlewood worked in agitprop theatre in Manchester. With Theatre of Action, Theatre Union, and finally Theatre Workshop (based at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London, from 1953), Littlewood became famous for her anti-establishment, risk-taking, collaborative theatre. Her developmental approach, called "workshopping," was applied to the classics and living authors alike. Some distressed dramatists found their plays workshopped beyond recognition, but the scripts of Brendan Behan and Shelagh Delaney, among others, were very successfully produced by this method. Littlewood was always opposed to what she saw as the bourgeois theatre of illusion; she advocated anti-realistic theatre, often based in popular styles such as the music hall, and she worked extensively with physical theatre techniques derived from Meyerhold, Stanislavsky, and Laban. Littlewood's irrepressible, entertaining, and yet politically serious style was epitomized by *Oh! What a Lovely War*. – Adapted from *the Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*

"what happens onstage is fractionally reminiscent of a TV documentary – a cumulative and episodic re-creation of the 1914-18 war years, mixing acted vignettes with still pictures flashed on a screen, and spelling out statistical information on a high frieze of light bulbs: 2,500,000 DEAD BY 1916. To say the least, this is unlikely material for live theater. But few walk out feeling that they have had less than a stunning theatrical experience." – *Time* magazine, on the original show

"In common with many people of my generation, I was enormously impressed by *Oh, What a Lovely War* when I first saw it, during its Wyndham's Theatre run in 1964. Its Brechtian/Piscatorian 'collision montage' style produced an effect which took my breath away: the force of the show's critique of the First World War made me completely rethink my youthful ideas about 'patriotic warfare', and about what 'theatre' was. The show was, for me, a brilliantly conceived and executed introduction to an essentially European theatre tradition till then largely marginalized in the United Kingdom." – Derek Paget



The show and the war

Derek Paget says the first production was much stronger than the script which was eventually published. "The script we have of *Lovely War* is, of course, better than nothing, but the peculiarities of the process of composition at Stratford East meant that 'the full smack' of its original effect has been adulterated in the Methuen edition we all use." The critic of the London *Times* thought, in fact, that "as the show comes over it is much more a tribute to the men in the trenches than an assault on the top brass. . . . This is partly because whenever indignation is allowed direct expression it goes against the nature of the production." But Dan Todman and others have argued that the portrayal of First World War in today's popular culture differs extensively from the actual experience at the time. *Oh, What a Lovely War* is one of their examples of portrayals of World War One that they say "fell short." Being produced shortly after the 50th anniversary of World War One, they say, it could have been remarkably innovative by offering a new viewpoint on the war, using government files that had just become obtainable. Yet, Todman argues that Littlewood (for political reasons) emphasized instead (and often inaccurately) the "incompetence of British generals and the futility of war." While apparently the original audience took these views "with a pinch of salt," critics claim that the knowledge about the war was more based on opinions toward a controversial issue instead of facts. "Despite Littlewood's extreme left-wing political standpoint," Todman says, "it was the nostalgia evoked by a 'musical entertainment' that used soldiers' songs which ensured the success of *Oh, What a Lovely War*." – adapted from "World War One: Misrepresentation of a Conflict" and Paget

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