

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Cuddy's Miles

Arthur McKenzie and David Whitaker

Music by John Miles

Customs House, South Shields

(2004)

The Jarrow Crusade is an iconic event, not just for the North East but for the Labour movement. It is approached with the reverence and seriousness due to that last desperate attempt to save "the town which was murdered", as MP Ellen Wilkinson, who accompanied the marchers, called Jarrow. Its place in NE folklore is enshrined in gloom and misery. Some old people, on being asked if they would like to see *Cuddy's Miles*, responded with "We lived through it. We don't want to see a play about it." Others have responded with variations on the theme of doom and gloom.

They don't know what they are missing! Arthur McKenzie and David Whitaker have taken what many might consider an odd approach to the subject: they've written a play about the people. It's not a documentary (although we do learn a lot of interesting facts about the March), and it's not a political tract (although the politics cannot help but be aired), but it is a play about the people who were involved.

The parallels are obvious: *Oh What a Lovely War!* and *Close the Coalhouse Door* take a similar approach. We see the March through the eyes of those who took part. It's not just Ellen Wilkinson: it's Cuthbert (Cuddy) Miles, the cook, who adopted a dog on the way; it's Jones, the undercover policeman; it's the randy young lad who wants to have sex with a new woman at every stopping off point; it's the Mayor of Jarrow and his boringly repeated speech. In short, it's what went on while they marched.

It's a completely new way of looking at this iconic event, and it turns it from an icon into a piece of real human experience.

It has its odd off-the-wall, almost surreal moments: the box in which the petition of the people of Jarrow was carried has its own song, hilariously delivered by Jane Holman, accompanied by a bunch of Keystone Cops; Adolf Hitler (Holman again) makes an appearance in a very funny double act with Lord Londonderry (Donald McBride, who also plays Cuddy), mediated by a German functionary (Micky Cochrane); Stanley Baldwin, of course, is there, too (played by Chris Connel, who also plays Councillor David Reilly, one of the leaders of the March), in hunting pink! Oh, and co-author David Whitaker also plays Paddy the dog - and a pig.

Between them, the cast of seven - the above plus Helen French (Ellen Wilkinson) and Wayne Miller (the undercover cop) - play a variety of parts and sing their hearts out. And they do that very well.

Which brings us to the music. John Miles' songs are all eminently singable and hard to get out of your head, and David Bintley's arrangements for the six-piece band capture exactly the feel of the music of the period.

It's great fun but with a hard political edge. In the first half the audience were fairly slow to respond as it was clearly not what they expected, but after the interval they had warmed to the piece and there was much laughter, helped along by Jackie Fielding's witty direction.

It has to be said that the first act is a little too wordy and not quite as tightly written as the second: there's perhaps a little too much scene setting, some of which goes nowhere. We are first, for example, presented with a David Reilly who is fiercely aggressive, almost the archetypal (Irish) revolutionary, but a few words from Ellen Wilkinson brings him to heel, although he retains his fire. This may, no doubt, be historically accurate but is irrelevant to the dramatic structure and could easily have been dispensed with, for it leads our minds off in the wrong direction, and the portrayal of him in the rest of the piece is at odds with that all-important first impression, so that we are forced to re-evaluate our feelings for no good reason.

But quibbles of this nature apart, *Cuddy's Miles* does an excellent job of making us look at an established icon in a totally new way - which has the incidental effect of heightening our regard for the men who made the journey, and for their families who had to face even greater privations when they were away. And what an excellent cast and band! Those who have decided not to see it are missing out big time. But it does run until the 16th October, so they still have time to change their minds.

Reviewer: [Peter Lathan](#)