

# British Theatre Guide

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## Eloquent Protest IV: Reading Between the Lines

A Remembrance Day Event  
The Duke of York's Theatre  
(2009)

The first *Eloquent Protest* performance in 2006 was conceived by Caroline and Hazel Roy as a special Remembrance Day event to underpin Caroline's production of Stephen MacDonald's *Not About Heroes* at Trafalgar Studios. Response to it has led to further annual events that look well on their way to being established as regular fixture.

As director Caroline Clegg says of that first occasion,

"For years artists, writers and poets have raised their voices in eloquent protest against the terrible cost of war. They have spoken out with passion against the warmongers who treat soldiers like cannon fodder and civilian casualties as mere statistics. Seventy years since the end of WWI and we are no closer to finding peaceful resolutions to the conflict. As a theatre director, I seized the opportunity to bring together the artistic eloquent protestors of today."

Sadly, this fourth *Eloquent Protest* remains equally timely. Hosted again by former MP Tony Benn with Janie Dee, it was the theatre's own alternative to the cenotaph service, though with no royalty, no government and opposition politicians and no military pomp. It has its own minutes silence and Last Post, but the main difference is that, though equally a commemoration of lives lost and lives damaged, this had none of the triumphalism inherent in that Whitehall inscription to 'Our Glorious Dead' but was a protest against the carnage and waste of war..

It fielded a wide range of talent from all branches of the business: singers from opera to folk, musicians, actors from straight and musical theatre, from Sam West and Robert Powell to comedy duo Shirley & Shirley, with former paratrooper and member of the SAS Ben Griffin, Adnan Sarwar, ex-Army bomb-disposal, and Joe Glenton, a soldier who faces court-martial later this year after going absent without leave in protest against what he describes as an unjust war - it was he who delivered those famous lines from Laurence Binyon's 'For the Fallen' so closely associated with Remembrance Day.

Material ranged from Ivor Novello ('Soldier Lad' as well as 'Keep the Home Fires Burning') and Rogers and Hammerstein to a song in Arabic by Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish (sung by Reem Kelani), while poetry ranged from Israeli Yehuda Amichai to Dorothy Parker, Simon Armitage, Spike Milligan and Pablo Casals as well as iconic verses by Wilfred Owen ('Futility') and Adrian Mitchell ('To Whom It May Concern' in its updated form), both read by West. Ben Griffin, who by legal injunction is prevented from talking about his own experiences or speaking out against war, read Siegfried Sassoon's famous declaration of protest from 1917 and Dan Willis and Sam Ellis played Sassoon and Owen in a scene from *Not About Heroes*.

An extract from Anna Frank's diary and Martin Luther King's 'Time to Break the Silence' speech were among the documentary items, as was an extract from a US Navy communication in which the Navy's largest aircraft carrier ordered another vessel to change course, refusing to change course itself, unable to comprehend non-compliance - though in fact the other 'vessel' was a lighthouse.

That certainly wasn't the only laugh for the well-balanced programme had its share of humour from the physical comedy of a couple of ballet dancers in a break from rehearsal to a telephone conference call between three wars and a satirical parent and child interrogation (Rupert and Matilda Wickham) "Daddy, why did we invade Iraq?" that bore a not surprising similarity to what the government told the British public.

Tony Benn himself gave things some historical perspective by looking back to protest over the centuries, including a statement by a soldier at a court-martial in 1814 that sounded entirely contemporary, quoted Oscar Wilde that

"Disobedience is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made... That is the reason why agitators are so absolutely necessary. Without them, in our incomplete state, there would be no advance towards civilization."

He also reminded us of the pledge made by his generation after serving in World War Two, embodied in the United Nations Charter.

Roy Bailey, who regularly appears with Benn, contributed his own songs and led a sing-along, Julian Littman and the EP Band gave his own number 'Trigger Happy' and in support, there was haunting woodwind from Jill Kemp. I have to mention that Peter Straker closed the first half with a brilliant and extremely moving performance of Lennon's 'Imagine' and Clive Rowe led the whole company to close the show with 'The Day Will Come.'

Quite apart from its significance as both commemoration and protest this was a thoroughly enjoyable performance, well worth waiting for a delayed start. There is much I haven't mentioned and it is only fair to credit all those other performers: Fiona MacDonald, Charlotte Forrest, Matthew Hardy, Jeffrey Harmer, Mia Jaye, Hazel Roy, David Harsent, Ben Goddard, Jane Milligan, Jason Isaacs and Ellie Paskell together with producer and director Caroline Clegg and assistant director Janie Dee.

Profits from this performance go to the Mark Wright Project. The Project, created by the parents of 27 year old Corporal Mark Wright (George Cross) who died in Afghanistan, aims to raise £4m to provide aid for servicemen and women recovering from the physical and mental wounds of war.  
[www.themarkwrightproject.org.uk](http://www.themarkwrightproject.org.uk)

*This was a unique performance on 8th November 2009*

**Reviewer:** [Howard Loxton](#)