

British Theatre Guide

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Johnny Got His Gun

Dalton Trumbo. adapted for the stage by Bradley Rand Smith

Metal Rabbit Productions

Southwark Playhouse (The Little)

21 May–14 June 2014

Dalton Trumbo wrote his novel as storm clouds were gathering in Europe. It was published in 1939, just two days after Germany invaded Poland, and in 1940 it won the US National Book Award, but its protagonist is a World War I US soldier blown up by a mortar shell in the last days of the conflict that killed and maimed millions.

Now, with government funding and the support of the media, Britain is celebrating the centenary of that war's declaration. It is no cause for celebration. But of all the events and performances designed to mark it now or that will come until the centenary of the armistice that ended it, you are not likely to find a more appropriate response than this play at Southwark Playhouse.

Johnny Got His Gun was first produced in 1982 off-Broadway but only now gets its first UK production.

Trumbo's book takes the reader inside the head of US soldier Joe Bonham and this stage adaptation shares all his thoughts with the audience.

As his war is suddenly ended, Joe at first thinks it is his homecoming. He remembers the crowds and the bands who saw him off to war and thinks of a similar welcome. He thinks he can see Kareen, his girlfriend, waiting to greet him but he's deaf he can't hear her, sees his mother in their kitchen baking, the chicken in their backyard but they don't see him.

Slowly he realises he is dead; but he isn't. He is wrapped up in bandages. What is happening?

They are cutting off his left arm. Why? He needs it. There's his mother's ring on it: the ring that he gave to Kareen and she gave him back as a pledge. He can't speak, he can't see, he can't hear, and now he has no legs either.

The wonders of medicine! Those so clever doctors leave Joe as a stump of a body with no face but have kept him alive, still conscious, still feeling touch on his skin, still thinking.

Those thoughts are not just his response to what is happening to him: the touch of the nurses, his attempts to communicate, but are loaded with memories. There are memories of that last night with Kareen when her father caught them and then gave them his blessing, of fishing with his father, of the stench of a body on barbed wire, of the friend with whom another girlfriend cheated; good memories and bad ones, thoughts about war and the makers of war.

"It's always the same people willing to sacrifice somebody else's life," Joe declares, "but it's time two people had a say in things: us little guys and the dead."

Pious talk and inscriptions on war memorials so often refer to the dead's "supreme sacrifice" but it wasn't their idea, they didn't make it. They were the offering going to the slaughter—and not just the dead. There were many who came back who paid a horrendous price to go on living.

Johnny Got His Gun was not previously known to me, neither book, the 1971 film-treatment with Timothy Bottoms nor any other adaptation. I was not surprised to find myself in accord with Hollywood blacklisted Trumbo, but I was bowled over by the power of this piece and this production.

Director David Mercatali has done an excellent job, marshalling Christopher Nairne's lighting and Max Pappenheim's subtle sound design to support a magnificent performance from Jack Holden as Joe.

Holden is working with a script that surely any actor would want a chance at but he sustains its intensity for some seventy minutes without let-up and keeps his audience riveted. His pace is fast but every word crystal clear, emotion wells into sweat and tears and, though what we see is the handsome young man who enlisted, he makes us feel with the amputated torso.

This is a performance and a production to catch. It's a knockout. It is not only a searing attack upon war, a work that can stand alongside Wilfred Owen poems and Britten's *War Requiem*.

Written when war clouds were gathering over Europe, it looks back to 1918 but is about all war—and not just war, for it also raises the question of medical intervention that may be a triumph for the doctors but leaves a life that has little real quality of living.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)