

British Theatre Guide

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

My Boy Jack

David Haig

Theatre Royal, Nottingham and touring
(2004)

David Haig's compelling play about the life of Rudyard Kipling originally played to packed houses at Hampstead. Seven years on, with tensions in Iraq and the war on terrorism making the headlines virtually every day, Haig's work now seems even more topical.

My Boy Jack catalogues Kipling's unswerving determination to get his son enlisted in the army just before the start of the First World War and the ensuing family rift that develops because of Kipling's consummate patriotism.

Belinda Lang, well-known for her television appearances in *2 Point 4 Children*, reprises her role as Kipling's wife Caroline. Both she and Haig have so much faith in *My Boy Jack* that they've formed their own company, Haig Lang Productions, to take it around the country. It's such a powerful piece that their belief in it is not misplaced.

Haig's performance is stunning. The man he portrays is not the Kipling of *The Jungle Books* but the writer respected for his war journalism and regimental histories. Haig, who actually looks like Kipling, gives us a tremendous insight into the mind of a father desperate to have his son fighting for his country only to be tormented with guilt and remorse when Jack is reported missing.

Haig the playwright presents a perceptive analysis of a family of their time: the father as head of the household whose will has to be carried out; the supportive wife who reluctantly obeys him; the son who wants to do his father's bidding yet needs to leave home because he finds it so claustrophobic; and the daughter who is mature beyond her years and makes her feelings known no matter what the consequences.

Lang is superb as Caroline, torn between her devotion to her husband and her love for her son, dreading the possibility that he might actually get into the army and later going to extraordinary lengths to try to find out what happened to him on the western front.

Ben Silverstone is commendable as Jack, the short-sighted boy who wants to give his father a reason to be proud of him yet is petrified about what lies in store when he leads his men into battle.

Simon Wolfe is also impressive, totally natural as Guardsman Bowe who shows the full extent of the trauma he suffered when he was in the trenches.

John Dove directs the play with sensitivity and style. Michael Taylor has come up with a wonderfully atmospheric set: the imposing Kipling home with a huge portrait of soldiers charging into battle is turned into a trench where British troops are sheltering before they go over the top to supposed glory. Matthew Eagland's lighting and Gregory Clarke's sound increase the tension - you are left in no doubt about how chillingly terrifying it is on the battlefield.

Some of the soldiers' Irish accents are difficult to comprehend and occasionally the noise of the gunfire is so loud you can't hear what's being said, although it paints a picture of the confused mayhem in the trenches.

Overall it's a tremendously emotive piece acted with passion and commitment by Haig and Lang whose enthusiasm spreads to the rest of the cast. It's a striking production which deserves to be a sell-out success.

"My Boy Jack" tours to Oxford, Richmond, Brighton, Norwich, Cardiff and Cambridge until July 10th

Reviewer: [Steve Orme](#)