

British Theatre Guide

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

Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme

Frank McGuinness
Hampstead Theatre
(2009)

This revival of *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* is a fitting tribute to mark any Golden Jubilee. It is now 24 years since Frank McGuinness wrote a superlative play, first seen in Dublin and then a year later at Hampstead, about the unspeakable horrors of war.

This work is in a tradition which links, amongst others, RC Sherriff's *Journey's End* to Gregory Burke's *Black Watch*.

It has much in common with Sherriff's classic of the genre, showing a disparate group of men attaining self-knowledge in a cause that they know is almost certain to end fatally.

Like both of the other war plays, McGuinness's proudly Protestant Ulstermen, "God's chosen", may seemingly be fighting in the cause of religion and the King but in fact their ultimate loyalty is to their comrades.

That comes as quite a surprise, since when we are first introduced to these four pairings of strong and weak, they appear to have little in common other than mutual suspicion and in some cases outright hatred.

The soldiers of the lowest rank are introduced in a moving and poetic prologue told by the one survivor Kenneth Pyper, played as an old man by James Hayes. Gradually, that versatile actor who once played Hurricane Higgins, Richard Dormer, takes over as Pyper's younger self, meeting the men with whom he will travel towards a fate very much worse than but eventually equal to death.

A splendid teller of tall tales, Pyper is frequently accused of madness by his fellows but, in fact, is about as mad - or sane - as Hamlet. He is a true eccentric, a sculptor from a well-to-do family who has come off the rails and thus finds himself a Private rather than a commissioned officer.

It says something about life that in each of the pairs who meet beneath The Red Hand of Ulster, it is the weaker man who is the more interesting.

In addition to Pyper, we have a preacher who has lost his faith, a belligerent if rather cowardly Orangeman and a cheery chappy from Coleraine. Each of these characters is forced to look deep into his soul by a bosom buddy and eventually, as we reach the inevitable final scene in a trench lovingly created by designer Michael Taylor who is very strong on symbols, they complete their journeys of self-discovery and find inner strength, as their partners weaken.

Before that, there is a surprising amount of comedy in the early scenes, as men who would normally be as likely to spit at each other as converse are brought together. We know what is going

to happen to them but, somehow, suspend this knowledge and, like them, enjoy the moment and ignore the future.

The genius of Frank McGuinness in writing this play is his ability to draw in the history of his own country, which was undergoing massive change in 1916. At times, it seems that the real enemy is not the German on the far side of a muddy field but the dreaded Fenian back home fighting for self-rule.

There is no doubt that when the play was first seen in the midst of the Troubles, there would have been additional resonances that, thankfully, are now far less easy to identify since relative peace reigns over Belfast and the six counties, almost every one of which is represented by these men.

John Dove's production is of the highest quality and his ensemble work together perfectly to achieve an unforgettable result. Few who see this play can fail to be deeply moved not only by the tragedy of a war to end all wars that didn't but also Frank McGuinness's portrayal of the ordinary men of Ulster who gave their lives for King, country but most of all their fellows.

Like *Journey's End* and *Black Watch*, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* richly deserves a transfer to a larger stage. Even in these recessionary times, one has to hope that an enterprising producer ensures that that goal is achieved.

Playing until 18 July

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)