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The Return of the Soldier

Rebecca West adapted by Charles Miller and Tim Sanders

Hope Aria Productions

Hope Mill Theatre, Manchester

6–29 September 2018

Musicals tend towards certain types of storyline. An epic story makes great use of dramatic stirring songs while a simple boy meets girl tale allows for melodic catchy tunes. *The Return of the Soldier*, Rebecca West's complex psychological study of class-consciousness and sacrifice for the greater good, does not really seem suited for the musical genre.

During World War I, upper class Kitty (Tessa Kadler) awaits the return of her soldier husband Christopher (Chris Jenkins). Instead, she receives an unwanted visitor—working class Margaret (Naomi Slights)—who, mysteriously, has received letters from Christopher. The reason gradually emerges: Christopher is suffering from a form of amnesia that has robbed him of the memory of his wife. As far as Christopher is concerned, he is still in love with Margaret; with whom he engaged in a passionate teenage affair. Margaret's feelings for Chris are rekindled, which could be tricky as she is now married to another man.

The Return of the Soldier is a story with multiple meanings. The title could suggest Christopher's injury has returned him to a state of innocence or be an ominous warning that, if he recovers, he will have to return as a soldier to the front line. There are different interpretations of what it means to be 'British'. Kitty presents an almost clichéd version—icily polite to those she considers her social inferiors and with all passion rigorously repressed. Tessa Kadler's tightly wound performance shows the full emotional cost of such an hypocritical approach suggesting Kitty is close to a breakdown. Margaret, the emotional heart of the play, is another—one might say healthier—version of British stoicism. Naomi Slights gives a gently understated but deeply moving performance of a woman making do with life and putting on a brave face despite heartbreak.

Discretion and understatement are key characteristics of the production. Charles Miller's chamber music score, performed simply by piano and cello, reflects the period in which the play is set and is perfectly suited to the intimate Hope Mill venue. The discreet score and the pastel shades of the set by Simon Anthony Wells and Leah Sams provide a sharp counterpoint to the high passions on stage. The subtle choreography by Matthew Cole catches the innocence of the romantic affair between Chris and Margaret as the characters move freely, in a relaxed manner, for the first time.

Typical of an era of fair play, director Charlotte Westenra steers a middle ground and does not favour any of the parties in the love triangle. A glimpse of the courtship between Kitty and Christopher confirms their love had been genuine and helps to build some sympathy for the brittle Kitty. The precise, clear direction is vital in the first act as Tim Sanders's adaptation, jumping between different times and mixing present day events with those recalled from memory, makes no allowances for those unfamiliar with the story.

The carefully balanced approach, however, means that the second act, which explores a psychological cure for Christopher's amnesia in some depth, starts to drag a bit. However, there is a wonderfully sardonic turn (complete with Noël Coward style vocals) from Marc Pickering as Dr Anderson. Pickering's fine comic talents are also on display as Margaret's hapless husband whose dignified response to his wife's possible infidelity is another interpretation of the 'British' viewpoint.

The Return of the Soldier conveys a complex story in an understated manner with some beautiful vocals and demonstrates that the musical genre is a lot more flexible than one might expect.

Reviewer: [David Cunningham](#)