



What They Left Behind

Wimborne Community Theatre

Review by John Newth

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Street theatre and its associated forms have a much longer tradition than sitting in rows, looking up at actors on a raised stage. Community theatre is a rather newer creation, but a danger that street theatre and community theatre have in common is that they are particularly rewarding for those taking part. This can lead to self-absorption, self-indulgence and some pretty dire experiences for audiences, who have a right to expect standards as high as they would from a more conventional production. So it was with slight trepidation that I stood on Minster Green, waiting for Wimborne Community Theatre's latest production to start. Not only was my trepidation misplaced; I was in for a truly memorable evening.

The play starts in the present day with two modern teenagers clambering over the war memorial on Minster Green. One of them, John, mocks an old lady sitting on the steps of the memorial and runs off, but the other, Harry, stays to talk to her. It emerges that her father, Alfred, survived World War One but suffered permanent psychological damage.

Next, the audience is divided into two groups and led to four locations around the town, where scenes are acted out which are based on genuine letters, diaries and artefacts, and most of whose characters were actually living in Wimborne during 1914-18. So the scene in the garden of Priest's House Museum is largely about two children as they collect conkers for the cordite factory at Holton heath, play at being German spies and learn about turning flower beds into vegetable patches. It is the scene with the most comedy, but the mood changes when the unhinged Alfred bursts onto the scene.

It was a quiet and thoughtful group that made its way to Church House, representing the Beaucroft Hospital that was established at Colehill. There is a contrast here between the gloom of the wards and the jollity of a smoking concert, and a nice touch was that our guide beckoned us away in the middle of the concert and we left the cast still singing, which added hugely to the credibility of the scene.

The next stop was the Cornmarket, where the Rector of Wimborne preached to young recruits going off to the front with all the sanctimonious hypocrisy that allowed the churches and other moral leaders to give their blessing to obscene slaughter. Two of the recruits are John and Harry from the first scene. Harry is Harry Angell, one of four Wimborne brothers who all joined up.

Then it was back to the Priest's House and a scene featuring Hilda Coles as a young girl, the building was indeed the Coles family's ironmonger's shop at that time, and Hilda became the formidable founder of the Priest's House Museum. Finally, the whole cast gathers on Minster Green again for the transition back to the present day and the same two teenagers.

The scenes on Minster Green and in the hospital are notable for their music, much of it atonal and discordant but skilfully performed. The direction is constantly imaginative and, especially on Minster Green, takes full advantage of the comparatively wide open space.

Unusually but intentionally, I have not mentioned a single name in this review, partly because the play is a true community effort and partly because the standard is uniformly exceptionally high and it would be invidious to single out any individuals. There are some outstanding performances (all the younger actors are particularly impressive) but no weak links. When community theatre is good, it is very good, and it doesn't get much better than this.

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