theatre at UBC

A COMPANION GUIDE

Oh What a Lovely War

JOAN LITTLEWOOD

Oh What a Lovely War

An MFA Directing Thesis Production

JOAN LITTLEWOOD'S
Musical Entertainment

Oh What a Lovely War

by Joan Littlewood, Theatre Workshop and Charles Chilton
Research by Gerry Raffles
after treatments by Ted Allan and others

directed by SARAH RODGERS
musical direction by PAUL MONIZ DE SÁ
set design by ALISON GREEN
costume design by REBEKKA SORENSEN
lighting design by ERIN HARRIS
choreography by KARIN KONOVAL

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TELUS Studio Theatre

In the interest of promoting our creative work and encouraging theatre studies in our community, Theatre at UBC proudly presents this Companion Guide to *Oh What a Lovely War*.

theatre at UBC

JOAN

by SARAH RODGERS
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"Theatre should be grand, vulgar, simple, pathetic – not genteel, not poetical." Joan Littlewood

Joan Littlewood, a lifelong socialist and radical theatre innovator, transformed British drama in the 1950s and 1960s. She created hundreds of original productions during her lifetime, as well as discovering new writers and acting talent, including Brendan Behan and Shelagh Delaney.

Born in London in October 1914, Joan Maud Littlewood was brought up by her working class grandparents. She received a scholarship to Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts where she began her acting training, but her naturally aggressive and experimental nature left her impatient with what she regarded as "the inanities of the normal West End theatrical routine." She subsequently moved to Manchester and joined the BBC in 1934. At the same time, she met folk singer Jimmie Miller (he later changed his name to Ewan MacColl), whom she married. Together they set up the experimental Theatre In Action, which was to be later renamed Theatre Union. For Littlewood, theatre was all about bringing drama to working class people. As she remarked, "We never went near the posh places, they wouldn't have had me anyway. We'd play in miners' halls and I'd get the job of minding all the babies so that the women could go." The company dispersed during the Second World War but came together again in 1945 as Theatre Workshop with Littlewood as artistic director. MacColl left the company to pursue folk music, while Gerry Raffles, a Manchester University graduate, came to join the company. Littlewood and Raffles started a romance that lasted a lifetime. In 1953, the company moved into the old dilapidated Theatre Royal in working class East London. Littlewood and other company staff slept and lived in the theatre while they worked to restore the ramshackle backstage area and the horseshoe shaped auditorium to the beauty of its heyday. In this unfashionable part of London, well away from the bright lights of the West End, Littlewood challenged the conservative and stagnant concepts of what was then prevalent and accepted theatre. Under her direction, working class accents were heard for the first time on stage in Britain, not as caricature, but as representative of genuine working class life. She showed a commitment to socialism and the collective and democratic character that could exist in theatre. It was policy for her Theatre Workshop to divide up the takings from a performance amongst all the actors and staff, including the cleaners.

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Littlewood's Theatre Workshop went on to produce such plays as *The Hostage*, by Brendan Behan, and *A Taste Of Honey*, by Shelagh Delaney. Her biggest hit of all time, was the 1963 savage satire on the imperialist First World War, *Oh What a Lovely War*. This production was so far reaching that even the Tory *Daily Telegraph* remarked that Littlewood had "achieved a working class revolution on stage." Joan Littlewood herself recalled, "It really was theatre of the people. It touched a nerve in England. It was done with great simplicity and belief and I knew it was something special." The play's power grew over the next two decades as the movement against the war in Vietnam developed. As President Bush bangs the war drums today against the Iraqi government, this play takes on new topicality.

Joan Littlewood received many awards throughout her career, including The Lifetime Achievement Award from the Directors Guild in 1995.

Joan was 87 when she died in her sleep on September 20th, 2002. At the time, she was at the home of her assistant Peter Rankin. She asked for a private cremation in London and that her ashes be taken to Vienne, France to be reunited with those of her partner Gerry Raffles.

Richard Eyre, host of PBS's Changing Stages and former Artistic Director of the National Theatre reflects, "Joan Littlewood's theatre was political theatre which didn't try to reform or reprimand. It sought to entertain and inform, and in the process broke your heart."

I believe Joan Littlewood was one of the first directors to create true ensemble theatre. I am so thrilled and honoured to work on a play that was created by a collection of individuals, each with a different point of view, working on ideas, on songs, on settings, on facts. A room full of people with a sense of humour and brains working together – now that's theatre!

"It now seems quite likely that when the annals of British theatre in the middle years of the 20th Century are written Joan's name will lead all the rest."
Kenneth Tynan, Theatre critic.

Sarah Rodgers

THE GREAT WAR

by JOY DIXON
Department of History

The First World War — the “Great War” of 1914-1918 — was a new kind of war. Where wars in earlier periods had been conducted between professional armies, the Great War was a total war, conducted between entire populations. Millions of men (over six million from Britain alone) went from being civilians to being soldiers almost overnight. These new soldiers faced a new and unfamiliar kind of war. After the first few months, free manoeuvring in Belgium and Northern France had given way to a monotonous war of attrition in which thousands of men were killed and wounded in battles that dragged on for weeks. Men who went to war believing it was a glamorous adventure found themselves immobilized and powerless in trenches and foxholes, and many who survived the war suffered from “shell shock” or from chronic illness as a result of gas attacks. Others suffered the loss of limbs or of sight or hearing. The greatest “achievements” of western civilization — its scientific and technological prowess — seemed to have turned on their makers, as new military technologies like trench mortars, gas, or tanks produced new and horrific injuries. By the time the war ended on 11 November 1918, over 10 million had been killed and another 30 million wounded. Russia sustained the heaviest casualties: over 7.5 million by 1917.

Millions of soldiers — many of them young men — lost their lives in the effort to exchange a few feet of muddy trench with the enemy

Millions of soldiers — many of them young men — lost their lives in the effort to exchange a few feet of muddy trench with the enemy. The harshness of life in the trenches — where lice and rats took over where the enemy left off and where, as in the winter of 1916-1917, hot tea could freeze within minutes and rations turned into blocks of ice — created new bonds between men fighting on both sides, and new anger and resentment against those who stayed comfortably “behind the lines”. But the war also required the mobilization of whole societies, and the restructuring of the nation to put it on a war footing. On the home front, women moved into new kinds of work to replace the men who had gone to war, or faced rationing and food shortages. Other women joined new military organizations like the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps, set up in 1917 to solve the problem of providing sufficient “manpower” for the army, or went to the front as nurses with Voluntary Aid Detachments.

The war became a “world war” in late August 1914, when Japan declared war on Germany. The French were heavily dependent on North African and Senegalese recruits, and regiments were raised in India and across the British Empire. For countries like Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the tragedies of Vimy Ridge and Gallipoli came to be remembered as battles that forged new nations. When the war ended the world mourned a “lost generation”. In every combatant country in Europe, agriculture and industry suffered extensive setbacks. Russia had been entirely transformed by revolution. The German Kaiser had been deposed, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire had collapsed. The United States was emerging as a new world power, and European dominance in international affairs was significantly undermined. And the Great War — far from being the war to end all wars — ushered in one of the most violent centuries on record.

Cover of the Toppling of Civilization by Louis Raemaekers, 1917

OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR

I have always been deeply affected by the stories of the first war, and almost morbidly fascinated by the pre-war period, with what seemed in retrospect to be a furious dance of death being played out in the tearooms and pleasure palaces of Britain's seaside resorts. The shoddily built piers with their exuberant Victorian pavilion architecture form the perfect backdrop for this exposé of the hypocrisy and blind patriotism that was World War I.

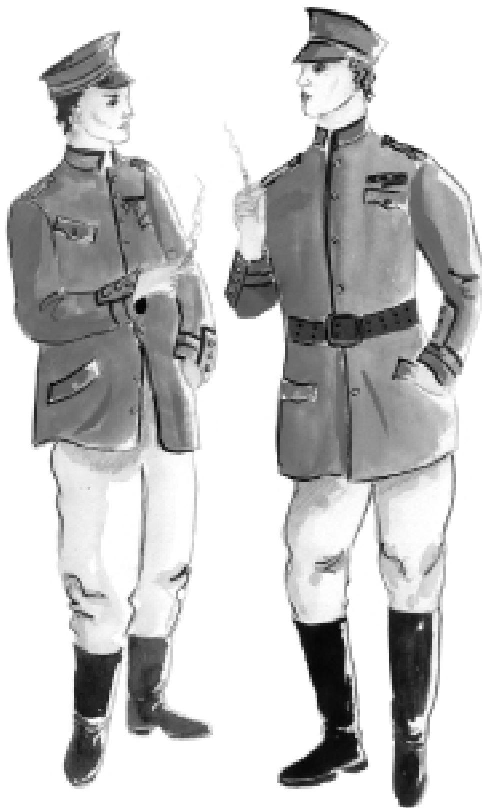
We have set the show in a makeshift shed on the sand, precarious on its thin stilts, its weathered board and batten façade threatening to fly apart in the slightest gale.

We have immersed ourselves in the culture of the Pierrot companies, nomadic groups of entertainers who performed on the beaches and boardwalks in the frequently miserable weather of England's south coast. Their very existence must have been precarious at the best of times, yet they seemed possessed of an indomitable spirit, recalling the lively tradition of *Commedia* troupes.

The brilliant sunshine of a summer's day fades as clouds collect on the horizon. The fairy lights strung along the boardwalk begin to sway and strain in the gathering storm. What is to become of our gallant little troupe? The sound of the band is blown away like a kite with a broken string.

Alison Green
Set Designer

set design by
ALISON GREEN
costume design by
REBEKKA SORENSEN
lighting design by
ERIN HARRIS



A German Sergeant   Moltke

Pierrots

OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PIERROT

by Stephen Heatley
Department of Theatre, Film and Creative Writing

Pierrot began life as a French transformation of one of the minor stock characters of the popular Italian Renaissance form, *Commedia dell'Arte*. Pedrolino (in Italian "little Peter" as Pierrot is in French) was often paired with his fellow servant, Arlecchino, although he was generally more personable and trustworthy with an elegance that his lowly cousin lacked. As the *Commedia* gained popularity throughout Europe, it began to develop specific responses according to the country and the time. In early 18th century France, small performing companies in the Italian tradition had sprung up on the outskirts of Paris, performing at the great fairs. These outdoor performances were extremely lively, and threatened

Pierrot is essentially a Romantic anti-hero, a melancholic, tragic clown

to make the more formal companies like the national theatre, the Comédie Française, seem dull by comparison. The government therefore passed a law that forbade these troupes to use words or song. This law was the birth of the French pantomime movement. (Pantomime literally means, "a story told through imitation or mimicry.") Enforced on and off throughout the century, this law was reinstated by the Emperor Napoleon in 1807. With the unraveling of the French monarchy and social structure at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Romantic era evolved in France. The practice of pantomime reflected this move towards the romantic and was developed primarily in smaller venues throughout Paris. One such venue was the Théâtre des Funambules. In 1816, a family of acrobats from Bohemia named Deburau joined the troupe and in 1819 their young son Jean-Gaspard substituted by chance in the minor role of Pierrot. He was so successful and universally loved by both the people of the streets and the moneyed classes in this role (his Pierrot was called Baptiste) that his style of performance eventually formed a model for French pantomime. According to Kay Dick in her portrait of Pierrot, "he was the spirit of the people, changing his mood as they changed their mood." Interest in Deburau's Pierrot persona was resurrected in the twentieth century with Jean-Louis Barrault's depiction of him in the classic 1943 French film, *Les Enfants du Paradis*.

Pierrot is essentially a Romantic anti-hero, a melancholic, tragic clown characterized by silence, absence (i.e. the detachment of an artist and a poet) and a codified pantomime vocabulary. He is generally a slender, pale, elegant jack-of-all-trades involved in fantasy farcical situations. One classic Pierrot turn has him look into a pond, see a reflection of the moon and instantly fall in love with it. The piece concludes when, seeing the real moon in the sky, he plucks it from its place in the heavens, and realizing that it is in fact cold and hard, he tears it to pieces and weeps. His standard costume consists of a loose white garment with a wide frilly ruff, a black skullcap and what has become the traditional pale, white face. It was Deburau who introduced the idea of white face by tamping his own with flour to make the face more universal and to draw attention to the physical and gestural life of the character.

"Pierrot has developed from a clown into a symbol of all mankind, suffering the misfortunes of all men, enjoying life, and taking no thought of the morrow. He is an idealist, a glutton, a hero and a coward, an anchorite and a sensualist. He is universal." These are the words of one of the last great Pierrots of early twentieth century France, Severin, in an interview with Barrett H. Clark in 1923. Through Severin's image of Pierrot as an everyman only able to deal with the immediate present, perhaps we can understand the appeal of this mutable character to Littlewood and Chilton for use in *Oh What a Lovely War.*

Gold's Margate Pierrots, circa 1912

COLLECTIVE CREATION IN VANCOUVER

by Marietta Kozak
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Oh What a Lovely War is one of the earliest and most famous collective creations of the contemporary twentieth century theatre. Joan Littlewood and her company, Theatre Workshop, developed the piece in the early 1960s, at a time when the traditions of the British theatre were changing radically and rapidly, and commonly understood theatrical practices were being re-evaluated. Canadian theatre began its own revolution in the late 1960s and the birth of collective creations companies in Vancouver followed soon after in the early 1970s. To this day, Vancouver maintains one of the strongest collective creation traditions in English speaking Canada.

First, the backdrop. In the early 1970s, there was a burst of creative growth in the professional community, both in the number of companies producing and in the number of locally written plays and projects. Some of this activity, indeed most of it, can be traced to the injection of funds into the community

Vancouver always has at least one company producing work that is based in artist-driven collective creation

through the employment grants then available, as well as an increased presence by the Canada Council and the development of the B.C. Cultural Services Branch (now the B.C. Arts Council). However, a groundswell of nationalistic fervour, post Expo '67, is commonly acknowledged to be directly responsible for the large increase of locally written and developed works, assisted and encouraged by the growth of the New Play Centre under Pamela Hawthorn.

An important cultural manifestation of this nationalism was the collective creation. In the rest of Canada, plays like *1837-The Farmer's Revolt* and *Paper Wheat* were being produced by companies like Theatre Passe Muraille and Saskatoon's 25th Street House Theatre respectively. In Vancouver, the brilliant company Tamahnous was also working in the genre. In addition to scripted works produced by the company, including many plays written for the group, Tamahnous Theatre was known for, and was based in, collective creation. It was a mark of the collaborative nature of this group that even the scripted works developed by the company's writers went through a workshop process with all of the members of the troupe, and had input from everyone involved with the project.

After the 1980s, the number of Tamahnous' collective creations declined and the company went in other directions. However, collectives continued in the city, under Roy Surette's direction with Touchstone Theatre. With the collective creation, *Sex Tips for Modern Girls*, the company's further exploration of this type of playmaking continued. This work seems to have been one of the first productions to significantly adapt the collective model, as it had a designated writer who was neither a performer nor director. The writer's presence in this case was strictly to create a text based on the collective's overall explorations, leaving the performers and director to focus on their own roles after the initial development period.

In *The Number 14*, (co-produced by Touchstone Theatre and Axis Theatre), perhaps the country's most successful collective creation was born. The show has toured around the world a number of times, and ten years after its creation, continues to generate royalties and employment for its creators.

After 1996 and Touchstone's move away from this style of theatre, a few younger organizations including The Electric Company and Boca Del Lupo began to work almost exclusively in collective creation. In their relatively short life spans, these companies have produced works like *Flop* and *The Last Stand*, and the collective process has been developed in yet another direction. These companies are similar in their make-up and operations to the earlier Tamahnous, with a core of creators who rotate in their artistic and administrative roles. However, both organizations generally augment their creative teams with outside artists on a per project basis, sometimes in key roles, although this is less so with Boca Del Lupo, who tends to keep its creative teams very small.

While there have been and are other companies and groups in Canada who have produced collectives, Vancouver always has at least one company producing work that is based in artist-driven collective creation. The attraction of this type of work is perhaps due to the now illustrious tradition of interesting and provocative theatre produced by collective companies, or, perhaps it is the lack of traditional playmaking rules that reflects the rough and tumble of this last of the frontier cities, or it is a wish to share equally in the joy of creation. In any case, collectives continue and the form develops in a particular Vancouver way, while companies keep building their reputations and repertoires through this most difficult of play creation models.

Oh What a Lovely War, backstage with Joan Littlewood and the original cast
(L to R) Frank Coda, Myvanwy Jenn, Joan Littlewood, Fanny Carby, Linda Loftus

OH WHAT A LOVELY WAR RESOURCE GUIDE

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frederic wood theatre 50 years

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