

My Boy Jack

David Haig

society/company: Banbury Cross Players (directory)

performance date: 07 Feb 2018

venue: The Mill Arts Centre, Spiceball Pk Road, Banbury, OX16 5QE

reviewer/s: Alex Wood (Independent review)

My Boy Jack had some success as a touring play after which it was seen as a TV film, starring its writer, David Haig. I thought it was appropriate for the anniversary of the end of the First World War and its themes extend well beyond the war itself. At 2 hours 50 minutes (with interval) I felt that the play would have had a bigger impact had it been more succinct.

That said, this is an interesting piece. Rudyard Kipling, a hugely popular author and totally committed imperialist, desperately wants his son, John ('Jack'), to join the army. John seems ambivalent about this but seems equally desperate about his need to leave home - probably because his father's ego edges out everyone else. John's mother (Carrie) and sister (Elsie) don't want him to go - one sibling died in childhood and, even at the start of the war they realise the dangers he will face. Kipling is delighted after he uses his influence to get a commission for John, whose bad eyesight had prevented this, but a year into the war John leads his troops 'over the top'; reported as missing in action, John's body is never found.

At the centre of this production was Philip Fine, a BCP regular, inhabiting the part of Rudyard Kipling with his usual confidence and skill. I especially enjoyed his speech about the German threat (which had something about the Brexiteer about it though he didn't need to concern himself with the German threat to make our fields bigger - English farmers did that decades later) which was Kipling at his jingoistic worst. But, later in the play Fine plays a quieter, more circumspect Kipling with great empathy.

Deborah Watson played Kipling's wife, Carrie, with sensitivity, balancing her role as the wife of a great English author in his prime with her role as a mother who has already lost one child and does not want to lose another. Carrie was a New Englander and I liked the effort which had been made to adopt an appropriate accent. Elsie Kipling was played by Dani Turner, with a portrayal which I thought was just right, challenging her father's certainties and her brother's questionable ambition in the confident way that I imagine young females of the time were beginning to do.

John (Jack) Kipling was played by Joe Deakin, initially as Kipling's son, in the confusion of his overbearing father's ambition for him and his own ambition to get away from home and later as an uncertain (ineffectual?) officer in the Irish Guards, steeling his men and himself to go into battle. A good performance from a newcomer to this group.

John McCormick has the other major role in the play, as Guardsman Bowe. A farm worker from County Clare, traumatised when faced with the reality of military action, he shatters the peace of Bateman's (Kipling's home in Sussex) when he arrives with his harrowing account of John's death. John always gives all to the parts he plays and that is true here but I felt that his representation of this clearly very disturbed character sometimes bordered on the melodramatic - perhaps something slightly calmer, at times more introspective, would be more effective.

Principals were given excellent support by Jem Turner (Guardsman McHugh/Major Sparks/BBC Announcer), David Hornsby (Guardsman Doyle) and Stephen Rouse (Mr Frankland/Colonel Pottle).

BCP are a little limited as far as sets are concerned so I was very impressed by the big scene change needed to transform the stage from the living room at Bateman's to a very convincing portrayal of a First World War trench, with the accompaniment of sound and lighting effects. A big effort had been made with this scene but I was disappointed that the actors' voices were not always as clear as they should have been, mainly because of an imbalance between the sound effects and the actors' voices.

A good effort was made with costume which fitted the period and, in general, was accurate.

Taking on this show is quite a challenge even for a very good amateur group like Banbury Cross Players. With a few first night hiccups and prompts I thought that, in general, they succeeded in producing a show which was both interesting and entertaining.