

A NIGHT IN THE WEST END 1914-1918

PRESENTED BY

Emma Hanna & Helen Brooks

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IMAGE GATEWAYS SLIDE

[Band Enter]

IMAGE - TITLE SLIDE with music

**BAND:**

*Overture to Arcadians*

[ALL ENTER]

**ACT I**

SPEAKER 1:

Welcome to 'A Night in the West End, 1914-1918', a lecture-concert written and produced by Gateways to the First World War at the University of Kent, in collaboration with the Invicta Concert Band and the Westgate Community Trust.

SPEAKER 2:

This evening we are going to take you on a journey into the heart of London's theatreland during the Great War. We are going to introduce you to actors, actresses and musicians, stagehands, producers and theatre managers. We are going to hear the songs that were played during the conflict, as if we were sitting in the stalls of a theatre amongst the men and women who lived and fought through the Great War.

SPEAKER 1:

To do this we are honoured to present singers Clare Millet, Marie Kelly and Jack Naismith, who will be accompanied by our pianist Stephen Matthews, and the Invicta Concert Band under the direction of Jim Harrison.

**BAND:**

*Opening of Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts for Soldiers*

IMAGE: WESTGATE HALL SOLDIERS

SPEAKER 2:

The hall in which you are sitting now was built in 1900, and was used as a Drill Hall for the local Territorial soldiers in the 4th Battalion of the East Kent Regiment, also known as the Buffs, and as the headquarters of the Royal East Kent Yeomanry in the six years before the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914. In the later days of summer that year Britain's armed forces were on general alert. The walls of this hall would have resounded with the sound of men gathering and preparing their kit, waiting for the order to mobilise. And once war was declared this would have been the last place in England that many soldiers lived before making their way to Folkestone to join the troop ships taking them to engage the Imperial German Army in the fields of France and Belgium.

IMAGE: MEN PREPARING FOR MOBILISATION

SPEAKER 1:

So it is here, with the events of late summer 1914 that we begin. From the moment war was declared at 11pm on Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, whilst soldiers here in Westgate Hall were preparing to embark for the continent, in London patriotic crowds swarming around Trafalgar Square mingled with well-dressed patrons of West-End Theatres.

IMAGE: PATRIOTIC CROWDS

SPEAKER 2:

Actor, George Robey, headed into the West End from the Stratford Empire, in the East End, just to savour the atmosphere. 'I kept saying to myself' he recollected 'do they realise what has happened and what it means for the whole world? All the hat-wavers seemed in their early twenties, and they behaved as if perfectly confident that within a week or two the Kaiser would be on the run'.

SPEAKER 1:

Once war was declared, although there was some initial panic-buying of food and other essential supplies, 'business as usual' became the phrase of the day. In October 1914, the *Bystander* magazine posited its own mantra - 'Frivolity as usual?' asking readers [...] and 'why not? Those of us who stay behind would do a sorry service to our country by moping all day and all night [...] The love of fun is eternal

and it will take a bigger beast than the Prussian to bully us out of it.' The actress Gaby Deslys explained in *Tatler* that actors and musicians must continue, to keep people in work as well as keeping people cheerful at a worrisome time.'

IMAGE: SOLDIERS AND SAILORS IN UNIFORM, ROYALTY

SPEAKER 2:

To do this, many London theatres started offering reduced price tickets to servicemen in uniform. In some cases this halved the cost of a theatre ticket which could range from 2 pennies to 2 shillings. It was a good patriotic move, yet, as from 1911 tickets had often been free for soldiers and Territorials in uniform, in fact this was a canny business move to protect profits!

IMAGE: SOLDIERS OUTSIDE THEATRE

SPEAKER 1:

Entertainment was big business in London. In the summer of 1914 there were 53 theatres in inner London, a further 51 music halls and variety theatres, and at least 363 cinemas - 'cinematograph theatres' - with many other places licensed to show films. There were also around four hundred touring musical theatre companies active across Britain. So vibrant was the industry that it had its own trade unions and magazines such as *The Era*, *The Stage*, and *The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*.

IMAGE: OSWALD STOLL

SPEAKER 2:

Leading theatre producers possessed a considerable amount of power and influence. Oswald Stoll, for example, was the owner of a nationwide entertainments empire which included the London Coliseum. Theatre magnates like Stoll did not hold all the power however. The capital's entertainment venues were regulated and licenced by the Theatres and Music-Hall Committee of the London County Council: a body which had the power to renew and revoke entertainment licences. When it came to plays, nothing could be performed without a signed license from the Lord Chamberlain, Viscount Sandhurst, a practice which continued until 1968 when the censorship of theatre was repealed.

IMAGE: SOLDIERS IN LONDON

SPEAKER 1:

Whilst theatres carried on as usual, around them London soon became the hub of the ever-growing leviathan of total war. The national and imperial war effort was directed from London. Every British soldier on his way to active service passed through the capital, as well as those from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and, after April 1917, America. And whilst fit and healthy soldiers left London, the wounded were soon being brought back there, alongside refugees from war-torn areas seeking shelter and safety.

SPEAKER 2:

It was not long before the war began to impact on London theatres, performers and musicians. Before 1914 the London stage had been a lively and cosmopolitan place.

IMAGE - VASLAV NIJINSKY

In 1911, Russian ballet had brought its newest star, Vaslav Nijinsky to London, and high-quality performances by actors and musicians from Ireland, France, Germany, the USA and Norway had proved to be commercially and critically well-received. Yet whilst Parisian theatre companies such as the famous Grand Guignol did come to London during the war, for the most part the risks involved in travelling by sea made international touring difficult and dangerous.

IMAGE: VICTORIA STATION

SPEAKER 1:

British touring companies also suffered as, with trains being commandeered for war service, many could no longer move their sets and actors. By the autumn of 1914 the number of touring companies had already decreased by more than half. And in London, the blackout ordered by the Home Office from October 1914 meant that theatre advertising signs were switched off, foyer lights were dimmed, and matinees became popular so that audiences could get home before it got dark

IMAGE: STARLIGHT EXPRESS POSTER

SPEAKER 2:

A show called *The Starlight Express* was one of those which was impacted by the war. *The Starlight Express* was a children's fantasy play by Violet Pearn, based on the imaginative novel *A Prisoner in Fairyland* by Algernon Blackwood. When war broke out it was already in development. Yet its producer, Basil Dean, was soon called up for army service in France. Lena Ashwell, actress-

manager of the Kingsway Theatre in Great Queen Street, took over, and brought Sir Edward Elgar on board to write the songs and incidental music. The show opened on 29th December 1915 and ran for one month over the Christmas season. Reviews however were mixed, with the production and stage scenery in particular being criticised. The music of Sir Edward Elgar however was praised as being 'beyond reproach' and was recorded by The Gramophone Company.

IMAGE: CHARLES MOTT

One of the most popular numbers was a delicate waltz sung by the 34-year old baritone Charles Mott, in the character of the organ-grinder. It was entitled 'The Blue-Eyed Fairy'.

IMAGE: BLANK

**JACK/BAND:**

***'The Blue-Eyed Fairy'***

IMAGE: LENA ASHWELL

**SPEAKER 1:**

By the time *The Starlight Express* premiered in December 1915, Lena Ashwell was already well known and not only as an actress-manager. Since the outbreak of the war she had played an important role in the war effort. In particular she was heavily involved in establishing the Women's Emergency Corp, which was set up on 9 August 1914, with the support of the Women's Social and Political Union, by the prominent suffragette Evelina Haverfield and the soprano Decima Moore. The WEC headquarters were located at the Little Theatre, just off the Strand, and their aim was to encourage and facilitate women who wanted to assist the war effort through professional and practical means. Since February 1915 she had also been involved in organising concert parties in Y.M.C.A huts on the fighting fronts.

IMAGE: ELLALINE TERRISS AND SEYMOUR HICKS

**SPEAKER 2:**

Whilst Ashwell's name is today closely linked with front-line concert parties, in fact she was neither the only, nor the first performer to take entertainment to the Western

Front. In January 1915, a month before the meeting of the Ladies Auxiliary Committee of the Y.M.C.A first suggested the idea of concert parties to Ashwell, actress Ellaline Terriss and her actor husband Seymour Hicks were already out at the front line.

SPEAKER 1:

When war broke out, two of Terriss's brothers-in-law had immediately joined the Army, but her 45-year old husband, the well-known musical actor Seymour Hicks, a was laughed out of the recruiting office for being too old and told to get on with his own job. Hicks and Terriss responded by giving entertainments in hospitals and performing in matinées for the less seriously wounded and the convalescent. They were 'all very small affairs compared to the great struggle itself' Terriss reflected later, 'but still we felt they were part of the great machine, and [...] we were proud of them.'

SPEAKER 2:

After one hospital performance, an injured soldier commented to Terriss that the men serving in France would love to hear some music. Using their social connections, Terriss and Hicks obtained permission to give New Year entertainments to members of the BEF in Boulogne and Calais. And in January 1915 they led the first concert party to perform for British servicemen behind the lines. During their performances - of which there were three each day - Terriss would perform a monologue called 'A Message from Home'.

IMAGE: SIMPLE BIT OF STRING

After this she would sing one of her best-known songs, 'A Simple Bit of String' from her 1896 hit *The Circus Girl*, customising some of the lyrics to this well-known song in honour of her military audiences.

IMAGE: BLANK

**MARIE/**

**PIANO:**

**'A Simple Bit of String'**

SPEAKER 1:

After Terriss and Hicks returned from France, and Hicks had recovered from a bout of flu contracted whilst at the front, they both continued to do their bit by performing for

servicemen throughout the war, just like many other performers who were unable to enlist.

IMAGE: BASIL HALLAM

SPEAKER 2:

There were, also plenty of actors who did enlist, or who, after 1916, were conscripted. Basil Hallam, most well-known as 'Gilbert the Filbert' served in the Royal Flying Corps, and the baritone Charles Mott whom we met earlier joined the Artists Rifles. Both Hallam and Mott, and thousands of other young musicians, saw active service in France, Flanders and beyond.

SPEAKER 1:

At home, actors who appeared to be physically fit were sometimes presented with white feathers at the stage doors and it became important for managers to publicise the fact that the men they employed were not eligible for military service.

SPEAKER 2:

Actors and managers who could not enlist themselves, could also show their support for the war effort by encouraging those men who were able to enlist, to do so. As the war continued into 1915, the British armed forces, particularly the Army, needed men to fill the ranks. The Liberal British government, however, was determined to rely on volunteering. Theatres became, in historian Adrian Gregory's words, 'arenas of recruiting'. Songs to encourage enlistment appeared in many of London's music halls, and performers such as Ellaline Terriss and Vesta Tilley would appear on stage dressed in military uniforms to encourage men to join up.

IMAGE: MARIE LLOYD

SPEAKER 1:

Marie Lloyd was another established music hall star who supported the war effort in her own suggestive style. Her 1915 song, 'Now You've Got Yer Khaki On', was one of many songs which encouraged men to join the forces, with the suggestion that they would become far more attractive to women once they were in uniform. With 'khaki fever' at its height and concerns that many young women were acting in immoral and indecent ways towards men in military uniform, songs like this, as you will see from the suggestive tone of the lyrics, did little to quell moral anxieties.

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**CLARE/**

**PIANO:**

**'Now You've Got Yer Khaki On' (Marie Lloyd, 1915)**

SLIDE: MILITARY SERVICE ACT

**SPEAKER 2:**

By late 1915 the British Government accepted that the period of voluntary enlistment had expired and in January 1916, the passing of the Military Service Act introduced conscription for unmarried men aged 18-41 years old. Men who didn't want to enlist, or employers who objected to a worker being called-up could apply to a local Military Service Tribunal which could grant exemption from service, usually conditionally or temporarily. For those who objected to enlisting on grounds of conscience, the Military Service Tribunal could either exempt them absolutely, demand that they perform alternative civilian service, or require them to serve as a non-combatant in the army's Non-Combatant Corps. The tribunal's ruling all depended on how well the individual explained their objection.

IMAGE: THE CO AT THE FRONT CARTOON

**SPEAKER 1:**

Throughout the war, around 16,000 men were recorded as conscientious objectors, with Quakers, who were traditionally pacifist, forming a large proportion. 4,500 objectors were sent to do 'work of national importance' such as farming and 7,000 were given non-combatant duties. 6,000, however were forced into the army, and if they refused orders, they were sent to prison.

**SPEAKER 2:**

It was not long before conscientious objectors and military tribunals began appearing in fictionalised form on the stage. One of the most famous examples was in the musical revue *Round the Map* which premiered at the Alhambra, Leicester Square, in July 1917. *Round the Map* included 'a laughter number' entitled 'The Conscientious Objector's Lament'

IMAGE: GITZ RICE

composed by serving Canadian Field Artillery Officer Gitz Rice with Davy Burnaby, and sung by one of the music hall's biggest stars, Alfred Lester. The song became an immediate hit, with the lyrics of the chorus repeatedly printed in newspapers. By November 1917 it was already featured in lists of popular songs for pantomimes that season.'

IMAGE: BLANK

**JACK/**

**PIANO:**

***'The Lament of the Conscientious Objector'***

IMAGE: CARTOON OF CO IN CHAIR

SPEAKER 1:

'The Conscientious Objector's Lament' parodied the Conscientious Objector, and showed them as weak and feeble. A biting satire, it was designed to shame men into military service by emasculating the Conscientious Objector. During the war manhood was redefined in terms of soldiering: to refuse to serve in the forces was to fail to attain the height of a masculine ideal. The CO was the antithesis of a soldier. He was the embodiment of all that was undesirable and unmanly: a shirker, lazy, spinelessness, un-Christian, un-patriotic, and un-English. At worst he was seen as entirely degenerate.

IMAGE: GAIETY

SPEAKER 2:

Revues like *Round the Map* were collections of comic sketches, sentimental songs and energetic displays of dancing, only distinguished from variety or music hall shows by the loose plots holding them together. They were often critiqued for being formless, chaotic, noisy and apparently nonsensical. There were also concerns about their morality with Viscount Sandhurst, the Lord Chamberlain, receiving many complaints about the nature of revues/topical variety shows, particularly from the Public Morality Council headed by Arthur Winnington-Ingram, the Bishop of London. Concerns over how behaviour at revues might become rowdy even led the London City Council to ban the sale of drink in theatres showing revues in November 1915.

SPEAKER 1:

Yet whilst there were concerns from the puritanical sections of society, revues drew large crowds to the theatres. And the importance of music and entertainments only grew stronger over the course of the war.

IMAGE: POSTER, SMILE THAT DO GOOD

In 1917, Lord Derby (Minister of War) declared outright that 'The people's amusements [...] should go on [...] Let those who come home be met with cheerful faces' he added 'Let them feel that their leave from the trenches should be marked by amusements that will abstract them from all the anxieties and dangers.'

SPEAKER 2:

Humour was very important as a distraction and release and it is no coincidence that the most popular songs with both servicemen and civilians were comic ones, and especially tongue-twisters. *Patty Proudly Packs for Privates Prepaid Paper Parcels* from 1915 is one example

IMAGE: SISTER SUSIE SHEET MUSIC

But the most well-known is *Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts for Soldiers*. So you can experience for yourselves the delight audiences would have felt in watching and taking part in a wartime tongue twister, as the last number before the interval, the band is now going to play 'Sister Susie' and Clare - in the true spirit of Vesta Tilley - is going to encourage you to sing along.

IMAGE: SISTER SUSIE LYRICS

**CLARE/**

**BAND:**

*'Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts for Soldiers'*

[ALL EXIT]

IMAGE: HOSTILE AIR RAID

## INTERVAL

[BAND ENTER]

**BAND: *A Little Bit of Fluff***

[ALL ENTER]

## ACT II

IMAGE: SOLDIER SAYING GOODBYE

**CLARE/**

**MARIE/**

**PIANO: *Keep the Home Fires Burning***

IMAGE: HOME FIRES POSTER

SPEAKER 1:

'Keep the Home Fires Burning', or to give it its original title, 'Til the boys come home', today remains the defining song of the Great War. It was first performed in December 1914 by Sybil Vane at a Sunday League Concert at the Alhambra Theatre, Leicester Square. She was encored nine times and the song immediately made it into the lists for the year's upcoming pantomimes. With its uplifting sentiment that the boys would come home it remained popular with civilians throughout the war. But it was not only civilians who took the song to heart. Whilst Siegfried Sassoon famously said he wanted to shoot the man who composed the song, he was in the minority. For millions of servicemen in training camps, rest billets and at the front, Ivor Novello's simple air and Lena Ford's moving lyrics provided a touchstone to home at the hardest of times.

IMAGE: IVOR NOVELLO

SPEAKER 2:

When Novello went over to France only months after the song was first performed he was overwhelmed by the response of the soldiers. 'I had to sing it to them no less than four hundred times' he reported in one interview 'we gave three concerts a day, and if I had had an iron throat I could have gone on singing it until the early hours of the morning, for the Tommies never could have too much of it.' Lena Ashwell, who was out in France for the first time and who had organised the concert party in which

Novello performed, commented as they drove away that 'all the camps seemed to have taken up that song'.

SPEAKER 1:

'Keep the Home Fires Burning' was one of a handful of songs which remained popular with the troops and those at home throughout the war. By February 1916, over a million copies of the sheet music had been sold and Lena Ford, who sadly two years later would die in a German air raid, saw her lyrics translated into at least 6 languages. In April 1916, the ubiquity of the song was firmly established when it was reworked as a new ditty entitled 'Keep the home flowers blooming'! for a new revue at the Alhambra, the very same theatre in which *Home Fires* had first been heard almost eighteen months earlier.

IMAGE: BING BOYS TRIO

SPEAKER 2:

This new revue was *The Bing Boys Are Here*: the first West-End revue for both Oswald Stoll and George Robey. Robey, of course, was already well-known as a music hall and pantomime performer but it was a 'daring experiment' to put him in a West End revue. It was an experiment which paid off. *The Bing Boys*, as Robey commented later, was 'the dramatic moment which was to change my whole way of work and life for years to come'.

IMAGE: BING BOYS ZOO SCENE

Together with Alfred Lester, George Robey played one half of the Bing brothers of Binghampton, who embark on an adventure to London, repeatedly bumping into Violet Lorraine in various different guises and locations. With scenes set at an Embankment hotel, the Pall Mall theatre dressing rooms, and the London zoo, it was, as the *Stage* put it, simply an 'opportunity for taking the audience to diverse places which permit of elaborate display in the manner of scenic art and costumes'.

IMAGE: AIR RAID DAMAGE

SPEAKER 1:

However, audiences could have been forgiven for staying away. For almost a whole year, London had been under attack from German bombers. And six months earlier, in the largest raid on London during the war, 17 people had been killed and 21 injured when a bomb fell in front of the Lyceum Theatre on the Strand. Eighteen-year old James Wickham, a call boy from the Gaiety Theatre survived the blast with 22 lumps

of shrapnel in him. He recalled being flung against the wall next to the orchestra pit entrance and being taken down into the Strand theatre bar along with other casualties, where he was struck by the sharp contrast from the earlier hilarity in the theatre.

IMAGE: CRITERION BUILT ENTIRELY UNDERGROUND

SPEAKER 2:

Theatres like the Criterion, which was staging *A Little Bit of Fluff* in October 1915, could reassure audiences of their safety with their claim that: 'This theatre is built entirely underground'. No such claim could be made of the Alhambra, but Oswald Stoll still found a way to turn the threat of air raids into a marketing opportunity. Playing on the idea that air raids were less likely on 'moony nights', adverts for the *Bing Boys* proclaimed: "Come and see the Bing Boys, it is a full moon tonight so you need not fear the 'Bang Boys'".

IMAGE: FINALE SCENE

SPEAKER 1:

And audiences did come. *The Bing Boys* opened on 19 April 1916 and ran for a remarkable 378 performances, being seen by over 600,000 people and transforming the fortunes of the struggling Alhambra. For George Robey, reflecting on the production later, the 'loveliest thing of all was to see how everyone 'carried on' while air-raids were banging and booming overhead, and how the audience sat through them enjoying the performance as if the only sound outside was the twittering of the sparrows in Leicester Square'.

SPEAKER 2:

The Bing Boys came to an end on 27 January 1917, when Robey moved over to the Hippodrome to play in the new revue *Zig-Zag*. But this wasn't the end. In February 1917 the *Bing Girls* premiered at the Alhambra featuring Wilkie Bard, Joe Cone and Lorna and Toots Pounds. And the following year, in February 1918 Robey returned to the Alhambra to reprise his role as Lucifer Bing in *The Bing Boys on Broadway*. Altogether there were over 1000 performances of the three *Bing* revues in London alone.

IMAGE: CLOCK GIRLS

SPEAKER 1:

*The Bing Boys* was a particular hit with men home on leave from the front. It was, as theatre critic A. E. Wilson wrote, 'the show that simply had to be seen' and which 'enlivened the lives of thousands of gallant young men'. It should be no surprise that in the summer of 1916, when the Battle of the Somme was at its height, men home on leave sought out an opportunity for distraction. George Robey himself reflected that 'scarcely an evening passed without a dozen or more officers coming round to see me and bid me good-bye upon returning to the Front'. And one critic reported that in the week of 17th July '19 out of every 20 men in the stalls were in military uniform'. Seeing 'that great crowd of soldiers with their lady companions' the critic reflected 'constituted a convincing argument against the contestation that theatres and music halls should be closed during the war'.

IMAGE: BING BOYS LEAVING BINGHAMPTON

SPEAKER 2:

The importance of theatre as both rest and restorative - or as it was often described, as a tonic - was reiterated throughout the war. 'To men on leave from the front', wrote B. W. Findon, editor of the *Play Pictorial* magazine 'a good entertainment is one of the best panaceas for the physical and mental stress to which they are subjected when they are facing the music in the trenches. Two hours and a half in a London theatre is a fine tonic. It makes them, for the time being, forget the past and enjoy the present, and provides pleasurable reminiscences when they have to endure the grim realities of war'.

IMAGE: BING BOYS MUSIC SHEET

SPEAKER 1:

And whether you had seen the show or not, you could still buy the gramophone record to play to Tommy, as a record shop in Ealing emphasised in this canny advertising from July 1916.

'The way in which our troops are flying to music of all kinds, by way of a 'nerve tonic', is very noticeable. Right varieties, such as the Bing Boys are Here and bright 'rags refrains' are specially favoured. War taxed nerves require something cheerful to ease the strain. If you are entertaining Tommy, and want some bright music or cheery gramophone records, why not pay us a visit? We have all the latest successes HERE'.

The biggest hit of the show that you might hear on this gramophone record was of course, 'If you were the Only Girl in the World'. Sung by George Robey and Violet Lorraine it quickly became a powerful link between loved ones at home and on the fighting fronts.

IMAGE: BLANK

**JACK/**

**PIANO:** *If You Were the Only Girl in the World*

IMAGE: ROBEY AND LORRAINE

SPEAKER 2:

Listening to those lyrics it is perhaps hard not to think, as one veteran did in 1936, that 'so many of those who were delighted by [the song] went away when the curtain had fallen to encounter no pleasure ever again'. This veteran was not alone in feeling this way. Two years earlier when Robey and Lorraine reprised their roles in 1934 and sang together once more, another veteran sitting in the theatre commented that he could feel 'ghosts mingled with the living audience'.

IMAGE: SOLDIERS LISTENING IN DUG-OUT

Yet at the time, as numerous accounts reveal, for men 'facing it' in the trenches, songs like this were a lifeline. Under fire in the Somme and drinking the rum rations, Sidney Rogerson remembered someone starting to sing 'If you were the only girl in the world', at which he says 'everyone joined in. What matter how much noise we made? So there we sat under our moving canopy of missiles and for nearly half an hour bawled at the top of our voices all the favourite songs'. Another soldier reflected that the song 'gave impetus to a buoyant wave of song that flowed across the battlegrounds and lightened the load of a million marching men'. Many remembered adapting the lyrics to sing 'If You Were the only Hun in the World'!

IMAGE: WILFRED OWEN

SPEAKER 1:

The songs of the West End musicals lightened the mood of the servicemen throughout the war. Visits to London on home leave would always include a trip to the nearby theatres and music halls, even for those with high-brow aspirations. Wilfred Owen eagerly attended West End productions throughout the war. They included

several middlebrow productions as well as a couple of Shakespeare plays. Yet his last visit to the theatre, in June 1918, was to see *The Bing Boys on Broadway*. Whilst he felt he *ought* to have gone to see Shakespeare, as his letters reveal, George Robey drew him in.

SPEAKER 2:

*The Bing Boys* was by no means unique in its appeal to servicemen on leave. On 31st August 1916, two months after the opening barrage of the Battle of the Somme, another production premiered which had a similar impact, albeit for quite different reasons.

IMAGE: CHU CHIN CHOW. EAST IS EAST

This production was *Chu Chin Chow*. Described as a 'musical tale of the East' it premiered at His Majesty's Theatre on 31 August 1916 and went on to be the biggest hit of the war.

SPEAKER 1:

Six months earlier, Oscar Asche, the author and star of the play, had been mulling the idea of an Eastern piece for some while. But it was only when he was driven off the golf course one wet Monday morning whilst on tour in Manchester, that he sat down to write it. Within a week the first half of *Chu Chin Chow* was complete. Three weeks later in Glasgow he completed the second half. And when he got back to London he hastily added in a leading part for his wife Lily Brayton, having realised that whilst he'd written a part for himself, he hadn't written one for her!

IMAGE: LILY BRAYTON

SPEAKER 2:

The story was based on that of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. Yet this was not, as one reviewer in the *Observer* noted, the story told in the 1001 nights, nor that told in the 1001 Pantomimes!. In fact, as many reviewers agreed, the story 'was not to be regarded as the chief thing in it'.

Clearly Asche felt the same. During air-raids he would stop the show and ask the audience what they most wanted to see, then filling the rest of the evening with requested scenes and musical numbers. At the same time, he cannily used the audience response to shape subsequent overhauls of the production, using the air raids in effect as mass focus groups. It is hardly surprising that over the five years

that *Chu Chin Chow* ran at His Majesty's it became less like a musical-comedy, and more like a revue.

IMAGE: CHU CHIN CHOW SHEET MUSIC

SPEAKER 1:

And as in a revue the music was central. As one critic astutely pointed out, Frederic Norton's songs 'ran all the way through it'. And these songs soon made their way across the channel, being performed at the front, in concert parties, and in Prisoner of War camps. So ubiquitous did the music become, in fact, that when the first troops marched into Germany the military band played the *Robber's March* from the show. And to give you a flavour of the music the Invicta band will now play a medley from *Chu Chin Chow*.

**BAND: Medley from Chu Chin Chow**

With IMAGE: ROLLING PICTURES OF CHU

IMAGE: CHU STAGE SET

SPEAKER 2:

Alongside these memorable tunes, *Chu Chin Chow* was also known for its spectacular staging and costumes. In fact, out of the meagre £5,300 which went into producing the show, over £3,634 went on the scenery, props, and costume. Together, these created a fantasy of the orient: a sensory experience, replicating the sounds, sights and even smells of the East.

SPEAKER 1:

The smells, more than likely came from the large number of live animals involved in the production. These included a camel, a bullock, fat-tailed sheep, snakes, a horse, a donkey, monkeys, and on armistice night a white dove of peace which was released to fly around Lily Brayton as Britannia.

SPEAKER 2:

Managing these animal performers didn't always go according to plan. One night, Nellie the camel, fell through a glass roof in the pavement into the alleyway below and was unfortunately killed. The next day, the animal handler approached Asche to ask him if he ever went to Soho restaurants. On hearing that did, the animal handler warned then warned Asche not to go there for the next few days. 'You see guv'nor', he told Asche 'I sold Nellie to them and she's a bit ancient'!

SPEAKER 1:

Sarah the donkey also caused some trouble, escaping and running into the traffic on Piccadilly Circus. She was taken by the police to Vine Street station where Asche, in his own words, had to go and bail her out. Unfortunately Sarah seems to have enjoyed the experience and repeated the escape attempt a number of times, always heading straight for the police station. Later in life Asche recalled picking up the phone on a number of occasions to have the Chief Inspector inform him 'Sarah's 'ere again'.

IMAGE: ACTRESS IN CROPPED TOP

SPEAKER 2:

Whilst the menagerie of animals provided the smells and noises of the orient, the costumes designed by Percy Anderson played an important part in creating the look of the East. In fact the clothing, or lack of it, became quite a talking point. Before the play was even staged, Ernest Bendall, one of the men responsible for advising the Lord Chamberlain on whether the play should be performed or not, became somewhat concerned by what exactly would be on display.

IMAGE: SLAVE MARKET

At the end of Act 1, the scene is set in a slave market and as the auction begins the stage directions read 'several women advance with gaudy draperies and pose, uncovering their nakedness to the buyers'. 'Behold, behold' cries the auctioneer 'bodies black, brown, white and cream, lips that melt and eyes that gleam'. After this the dancers dance wildly, whirling, throbbing, with bosoms heaving.

IMAGE: MIRROR IMAGE OF SLAVE GIRL

SPEAKER 1:

It is hardly surprising that this raised a red flag for Bendall, whose job was to prevent any impropriety or immorality on the stage. However after raising the issue with Asche directly, whom of course he knew, Bendall could reported back to the Lord Chamberlain that he had been 'assured [...] that the oriental draperies of the girls in the slave-market scene will be quite adequate, and that the 'uncovering' as seen by the audience will only be that of the shoulders'. He added further that Asche had shown him him 'a sketch of the costume by Percy Anderson which was quite free from objection'

IMAGE AILEEN D'ORME

SPEAKER 2:

From a twenty-first century perspective, there are clearly a host of issues with the scene and its representation of race and gender. Yet at the time, most criticism revolved around the scene's lack of artistry. One of the most scathing reviews commented dismissively 'we would rather watch the wobblings of a dozen or so ill-set blanc-manges then again spend our time regarding such pseudo-terpsichorean antics. The costumes designed by Mr Percy Anderson struck us for the most part as a conglomeration of garish gaudiness'. One of the few things this reviewer did like was Frederick Norton's music. Their praise however did not extend to the lyrics. It was a shame, they noted, that the 'beautiful voices' of Mr Courtice Pounds and Aileen d'Orme should be 'spoilt by silly words'. We'll leave it to you to determine just how silly the words are, as we listen to Marie Kelly performing the most famous song from the show:" 'Any Time's Kissing Time'.

IMAGE: BLANK

**MARIE/**

**PIANO:**     *Any Time's Kissing Time*

IMAGE: CHU CHIN CHOW POPULARITY POSTER

SPEAKER 1:

Whilst the words may well have been somewhat silly, the plot loose, and the content constantly changing, *Chu Chin Chow's* success should be seen in light of, rather than despite of, these factors. Over the course of the five years that it ran at His Majesty's it made over 3.5 million pounds and was seen by over 2 million 800 thousand people. Many of these were repeat visits. In fact, it became in many people's eyes, quite a 'habit'.

IMAGE: OSCAR ASCHE AS CHU

SPEAKER 2:

On the final night of the production in 1921, Asche was moved by meeting one of these repeat customers. She told him about how she and her son had seen the play on opening night in 1916. Every time, her son was on leave, she told Asche, they had always 'paid Chu a visit'. Just before the the armistice however he had been killed. In his memory, on the anniversary of each of his leaves, she had always booked two stalls seats, sitting in one, and placing placed his cap on the other.

IMAGE: MOUNTAINS SCENE

SPEAKER 1:

When it finished its run *Chu Chin Chow* had been performed 2,238 times. The only other wartime production which came close to this was Frederick Lonsdale's *The Maid of the Mountains* which ran for total of 1,352 performances. This comic opera was first seen by London audiences at Daly's Theatre, just off Leicester Square on 10 February 1917. It was an immediate hit, and was praised in particular for its well-roundedness.

SPEAKER 2:

The reviewer for the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* wrote that 'The success is not achieved by a predominant talent in either composers, or author, or actors, but by an excellent blending of clever work from them all. We have tuneful numbers, sprinkled with some snatches of melody more than merely tuneful, happy rather than witty dialogue, and an all-round competence of acting and opportunities for acting'. In a similar vein, the *Pall Mall Gazette* commented that 'without pretending to be great, everything happens to be good - charming scenes, charming play, charming players, charming lyrics, and charming music - all fitting together into a charming success'.

IMAGE: THE GOVERNOR'S PALACE

SPEAKER 1:

The music for *The Maid of the Mountains* had in fact first been written by Harold Fraser-Simson a decade earlier, for an entirely different plot, which had never made it to the stage. It was Oscar Asche, as producer, who saw the potential for it to be re-set in a romantic comic-opera. Perhaps it was the pre-war romanticism of the music combined with the setting of a remote fictional land far removed from any suggestion of war, which led contemporaries to praise the play for its charm and delight.

And to give you a flavour of this, the Invicta Concert Band will now play a medley from *The Maid of the Mountains*.

**BAND:** *Medley from Maid of the Mountains*

With IMAGE: ROLLING IMAGES OF PRODUCTION

IMAGE: JOSE COLLINS AT FOUNTAIN

SPEAKER 2:

Whilst a number of reviews emphasised the ensemble nature of the *The Maid of the Mountains*, from its first performances the production became closely associated with its leading lady, Jose Collins. Collins was already a well-known actress in 1917. By 1914, at the age of only 27, she had performed in the West End and more recently, on Broadway.

SPEAKER 1:

Yet despite her American fame, Collins only received the relatively low sum of £50 a week when she first took on the role of Teresa, the gypsy bandit maid in *The Maid of the Mountains*.

IMAGE: GEORGES EDUARDES

The reason was the large debts being held over Daly's Theatre after the death of George Edwardes less than eighteen months earlier. Edwardes had been a leading figure in British theatre since the 1880s. He had led the movement towards musical comedy and managed a number of successful theatres, including Daly's. Yet when he died in October 1915, he left behind him huge debts which Robert Evett, his successor, had to pay off.

IMAGE: ROBERT EVETT

SPEAKER 2:

It was with this in mind that Evett turned to the script for *The Maid of the Mountains*. Recognising its potential he assembled the production team and produced a play which was such a success that not only were all the debts paid off but the Edwardes family gained a new and substantial fortune.

SPEAKER 1:

And they were not the only ones. Jose Collins, who had begun on a salary of only £50 a week salary, was soon making £300 a week. By the end of the year, the combined weekly income of her stage performances and gramophone recordings, came to a staggering £800 a week - the equivalent of £23k today.

And to hear one of Collins' most popular songs, and recordings, here, for her final solo, is Marie Kelly singing 'Love will find a way'.

IMAGE: BLANK

**MARIE/**

**PIANO:** *Love will Find a Way*

IMAGE: JOSE COLLINS IN HAT

SPEAKER 2:

Collins carried on performing in *The Maid of the Mountains* for the duration of the run. After the war she went on to perform in a number of plays, revues and films. But she also kept coming back to reprise her role as the 'maid of the mountains', In fact she became so connected with the production that she was often affectionately known by the nickname the 'Maid of the Mountains'.

SPEAKER 1:

Of the others we have met this evening they had mixed fortunes. Approximately 10 percent of the men who served with Britain's armed forces did not return, and the British entertainment industry mourned its losses, along with the rest of the nation.

IMAGE: BASIL HALLAM

SPEAKER 2:

Basil Hallam, known to all as Gilbert the Filbert, put on impromptu performances for his comrades on the Western Front. He died in an observation balloon accident in Calais, in July 1916.

IMAGE: CHARLES MOTT

SPEAKER 1:

Charles Mott, Elgar's favourite baritone, continued to perform until he was conscripted into the Army, joining the Artist's Rifles in 1918. He died of wounds suffered during the German Spring Offensive in May 1918.

IMAGE: GITZ RICE

SPEAKER 2:

Gitz Rice continued to compose songs to entertain his fellow servicemen on the Western Front. He was gassed at Vimy Ridge in April 1917 but returned to Canada to oversee troop entertainments, and performed for Canadian troops in the Second World War.

IMAGE: BASIL DEAN

SPEAKER 1:

Basil Dean who was meant to produce *The Starlight Express* served as a Captain with the Cheshires and directed the Entertainment branch of the Navy and Army Canteen Board. After the war he went on to head ENSA, the government sponsored body which took entertainment to the troops during the Second World War.

IMAGE: IVOR NOVELLO

SPEAKER 2:

Ivor Novello, after an inglorious period of duty in the Royal Naval Air Service, went on to become one of the most famous stars of his generation.

IMAGE: ROBEY, LORRAINE AND LESTER

SPEAKER 1:

George Robey, who was too old to serve in the forces, performed in several hit shows throughout the war and was awarded a CBE in 1919 for his charitable work during the war.

SPEAKER 2:

Violet Lorraine's appearance in 'The Bing Boys' brought her critical acclaim. After her marriage in 1921 she retired from the stage but acted in several films in the interwar period.

SPEAKER 1:

Alfred Lester starred in many hit wartime shows, but after persistent ill health he died in 1925 at the age of 50.

IMAGE: CHU CHIN CHOW SET

SPEAKER 2:

Percy Anderson continued his career as a set designer and artist. Some of his work can be seen in the National Portrait Gallery, the British Museum and the Louvre.

IMAGE: MARIE LLOYD

SPEAKER 1:

Marie Lloyd, known as 'The Queen of the Music Hall', entertained troops on the home front throughout the war. She died in 1922 after falling ill on stage at the Alhambra Theatre.

IMAGE: OSCAR ASCHE

SPEAKER 2:

Oscar Asche continued to produce and act, although he never again achieved the success of *Chu Chin Chow* or *Maid of the Mountains*. Despite having made millions from both productions, within ten years he was penniless, having gambled it all away.

IMAGE: OSWALD STOLL

SPEAKER 1:

Oswald Stoll was knighted in 1919 for the establishment of his eponymous foundation for disabled soldiers and their families.

IMAGE: LENA ASHWELL

SPEAKER 2:

Lena Ashwell strove to provide work for female artists throughout the war. She worked with the YMCA to send civilian entertainers to provide concert parties for servicemen. She was a vocal advocate for the arts and was awarded an OBE for her services to wartime entertainment and charity.

IMAGE: ELLALINE TERRISS AND SEYMOUR HICKS

SPEAKER 1:

Ellaline Terriss and Seymour Hicks continued their careers and they performed with ENSA for troops during the Second World War. Their legacy is continued today by their granddaughter, Lucia, who curates the Seymour Hicks museum in Deal, and who we are delighted to have here with us tonight.

IMAGE: BLANK

SPEAKER 2:

And as that brings us back to the present day, all that's left now is to thank you for joining us for this brief visit to the wartime west end.

SPEAKER 1:

It's a visit which would not have been possible without our wonderful guides. The voices of Marie Kelly,

SPEAKER 2:

Clare Millett

SPEAKER 1:

and Jack Naismith,

SPEAKER 2:

The artful accompaniments of Stephen Matthews on piano

SPEAKER 1:

and the Invicta concert band, conducted by Jim Harrison.

SPEAKER 2:

And to send you home, we're going to finish tonight's lecture-concert with the Invicta Band playing a medley of familiar tunes that were popular from the west end to the western front, beginning with land of hope and glory.

Both:

Goodnight!

**BAND:**

*Land of Hope and Glory*

**IMAGE: ROLLING WARTIME PHOTOS**

[ALL EXIT]

*Songs of the Great War, 1914-1918*