



THE ACCRINGTON PALS

By Peter Whelan

On the eve of the First World War the young men of Accrington hear Kitchener's call for a New Army and become the smallest town in England to raise a Pals Volunteer Brigade. When they arrive in France, the brutal reality of the trenches is beyond anything they were prepared for. And back home amongst the women they leave behind – their mothers, wives, daughters, lovers – nothing can ever be the same again.

Peter Whelan's play dramatizes the lives of ordinary people caught up in historical events.

BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY

At the heart of the play THE ACCRINGTON PALS lies a devastating statistic: In just ten days during the Great War, the Lancashire town of Accrington sent a thousand of its men and boys to War. In just ten minutes, most of them were slaughtered on the Somme.

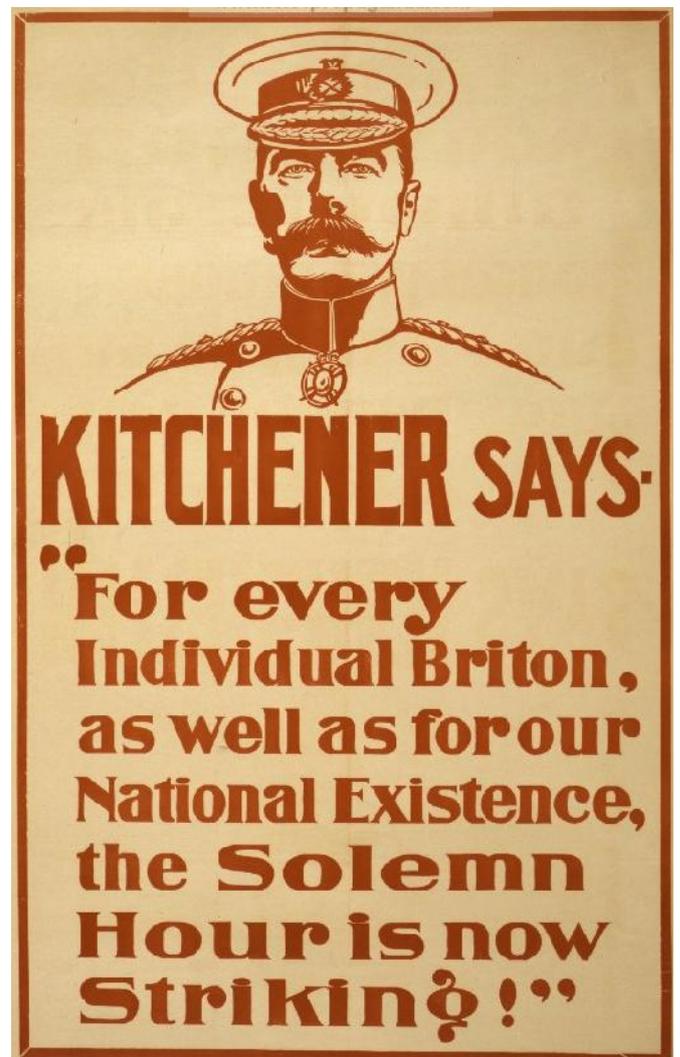
So, what were the 'Pals' battalions? And why were so many men and boys eager to be part of them?

When Britain declared war against Germany on 4 August 1914, its professional army comprised just 450,000 men – including only around 900 trained staff officers – and some 250,000 reservists.

This posed a problem. Lord Kitchener, the newly appointed Secretary of State for War, warned the government that the war would be decided by the last million men that Britain could throw into battle.

With conscription undesirable, Kitchener decided to raise a new army of volunteers. He issued a call to arms, looking for 100,000 volunteers, aged between 19 and 30, at least 1.6m (5'3") tall and with a chest size greater than 86cm (34 inches). It was suggested that men would be more willing to join up if they could serve with people they already knew; this led to the 'Pals' battalions: volunteer battalions made up of the men and boys from particular towns and cities. Civic pride and community spirit meant areas competed with each other to attract the greatest possible number of new recruits.

In Accrington, recruitment began on 14 September, with 104 men accepted for service in the first three hours. Brothers, cousins, friends and



workmates enlisted together and within ten days the Accrington Pals had reached full strength of some 1,000 men. Accrington was the smallest town in England to raise a Pal's Battalion. When they left, the town was left almost entirely without men. According to stories, the women left behind in Accrington put their ears to the railway lines in an effort to hear the guns firing.

In order to inspire men to volunteer, Kitchener's Campaign fuelled their patriotism. Tales of (often fictitious) German atrocities were spread. As well as this, most people believed that the war would be short. Army life meant regular pay, proper food and clothing. So, for many men, who worked long hours in harsh conditions, army service appeared to promise opportunities, excitement and travel which they would otherwise have been denied. The reality was very different once the Pals battalions reached the Somme in 1916. The British

army walked into a slaughterhouse. The battle on 1 July marked the army's greatest single loss in its history, with 60,000 casualties, of which 20,000 were dead. The Pals Battalions suffered accordingly: of the 720 Accrington Pals who participated in the Battle, 584 were killed, wounded or missing in the attack.

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WHY NOT? Research images of Kitchener's Campaign to recruit for volunteers. What atmosphere do the posters create? Choose one of the male characters from THE ACCRINGTON PALS. Write a monologue from their perspective describing how they feel about the poster.

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WHY NOT? Improvise the scene where Tom first tells May he has decided to join the Pals.

REHEARSAL NOTES FROM ASSISTANT DIRECTOR ED LEWIS

Working on a play which is inspired by true events and set in a real place presents unique challenges. Assistant Director Ed Lewis gives us an insight into how the cast and creative team have brought the world of the play to life...



Emma Lowndes as May and Robin Morrissey as Tom
(Photo - Jonathan Keenan)

I have to admit that, rather embarrassingly, I had never heard of THE ACCRINGTON PALS before I started working on the production. I think that the reason is because I'm from 'down south'. It also may be because the play hasn't had many professional revivals – and after reading it I was quite surprised that it hadn't.

The first thing that struck me after reading the play was that it could quite easily be called THE ACCRINGTON GALS, as the women of Accrington are so predominant in the writing! This is one of the aspects of this great play that drew me in straight away; very rarely can you find a play, let alone a play about war, where a group of women are at the very centre of the action. We are used to seeing World War One and Two depicted by horrific scenes of war, pictures of no man's land and dead bodies but in THE ACCRINGTON PALS, writer Peter Whelan has done the opposite. The play shows us the effects of the war on the people back at home and how the war affected a whole community.

Researching the world of the play.

One of the first challenges that a play like THE ACCRINGTON PALS presents an acting company

and creative team is the fact that it is based on a true story and a real place. When you are tackling a Shakespeare play, for example, you know that the world that Shakespeare has created is almost always totally made up and so you can make your own artistic choices about that world and its characters. However, in this play the characters are based around a society that actually existed and the way these characters act and behave is directly linked to that society. Therefore, for an actor, Director or Designer to begin to understand the play they need to understand the society it is based on. Without this understanding, the action onstage would not look true or authentic.

A lot of research is conducted before rehearsals begin, as without understanding the society it would be almost impossible for a director to decide on the look and feel of the production. However, this raises some questions: How do you convey weeks of research to your actors while at the same time letting them make their own discoveries? How do you ensure the research you share is useful to the actors? It's important that research doesn't become a distraction. And how do you make sure sharing research and information doesn't feel like a school lesson? This is quite a difficult task and many directors approach this in different ways.

Most plays only have about a month to rehearse, therefore the amount of time which can be spent sharing research is limited. For the acting

company, research needs to be shared at the beginning of the process as it is part of the foundations that they will use when creating their characters.

The first week of our rehearsals consisted of 'table work': this is when the Director and the acting company sit round a table and interrogate the script. To aid the acting company through the table work the Director, James Dacre, had photographs of everything that was mentioned in the script that the actors may be unfamiliar with – for example places in Accrington like the Ebenezer Church or the Old Red Lion Pub. By seeing photographs of these places, the actors can put a tangible image into their head when they are speaking the lines. This will hopefully make the world that their characters are living in feel more vibrant and tangible for the audience. Photographs on the whole have provided a lot of inspiration for the acting company and the rehearsal room walls are literally covered with photographs from the period.

We also used real people's stories to build the world of the play. The actors researched diaries, letters, anecdotes and newspaper articles about real people from the area. This helped to capture the sense of ordinary people caught up in extraordinary events. We also used fictional sources, like the stories of D.H Lawrence, to help conjure the world of the play.



(l-r) Laura Elsworthy as Bertha, Rebecca Callard as Sarah, Sarah Belcher as Annie, Sarah Ridgeway as Eva and Emma Lowndes as May (Photo - Jonathan Keenan)

Exploring Accrington.

To build our research further we took a trip to Accrington on a very cold winter morning. This was very helpful as half of the scenes in the play are set on the streets of Accrington and many of the monuments and streets are still very similar to how they were back in 1915. Walking around Accrington helped us to soak up the atmosphere of the town. It also helped us enormously when it came to staging some of the scenes: many scenes in the play take place in winter and our research trip really helped the actors to imagine being in Accrington at winter time.

On our trip we also met with a local historian, Walter Holmes, who is an expert on the Pals battalions that were assembled in the local area. He helped many of the male actors in the group by telling them how the recruitment impacted the men of the community and why someone from Accrington might have volunteered to be in the army. Walter described how many of the men that returned on leave from the intensive army training camps actually came back looking fitter and healthier. Walter explained that most people who lived in Accrington at the time worked in mills. Mill work consisted of long hours and hard labour: workers lived on very little, meaning that food was



Cast member Derard Kearns with a pupil from Accrington Academy – a school visit was incorporated as part of the research in Accrington

not in abundance and the mills themselves were usually very badly ventilated leading to chest illnesses. In contrast, at the army training camps the men received three square meals a day, fitness drills and a big dose of fresh air. According to Walter's research this meant that when the Pals returned home on leave they looked completely transformed from when they left. This has been helpful for us in rehearsals as there is a scene when we see the characters back from leave. We now know that there needs to be a visible difference in the way the actors hold themselves and appear compared to earlier scenes.

Working with a living writer.

The fact that writer Peter Whelan is still alive has been insightful and useful to our rehearsal process. Before rehearsals began James spent a few days discussing the play and its characters with Peter. This has meant that James' opinions on the play are coming from a viewpoint that keeps Peter's intentions in mind. This means that while Peter cannot be in the rehearsal room with us, he can still have a presence through James. There have been several questions that have arisen during rehearsals that we have been able to refer to Peter. For example, we were not sure if the character of Reggie would have been working in a mill or not. We asked Peter and he wrote back saying that in his opinion, Reggie would have been working in the mills. This has had an effect not only on the way the actor has interpreted the character but also on the design and look of his costume.

The Importance of Movement Work.

Although the backdrop to THE ACCRINGTON PALS is reality, the play also transcends the real world into something more heightened and poetic. In rehearsals, the Creative Team – including Movement Director Ann Yee and Fight Director Terry King – worked with the actors to create movement sequences which are geared towards ensuring that the momentum, poetry and epic quality of the play are captured through movement. The rhythm of "street doors slamming" "clogs clattering on stone cobbles", marching bands, knocker-uppers, street carts, bartering and selling, singing and socializing are all evoked in these movement sequences. We also explored how movement could be used to recreate the conditions of the Somme and the military culture of World War One: for example staging battle scenes from the Front during transitions, in order to evoke the tragic fate of the soldiers of Accrington.

The role of the Assistant Director.

The role of an assistant director is a difficult one to fully understand, because the director defines your role – different directors want different things from their assistants. So, unless you work exclusively with one Director (which is very rare) your role will always be changing.

For THE ACCRINGTON PALS my role has predominantly been as a researcher. I have been on hand to look into how much a farthing is worth in today's money, for example, or to find out exactly how a bath might be taken in 1914 and why they had to ration the hot water for it. I would go away and research these and feedback directly to the actors.

I have also been helping James with scheduling the rehearsals. Scheduling is a difficult task as there are several demands on a rehearsal day: for example, an actor might be needed for a costume fitting when you need them in rehearsals. Part of my job has been to look over the schedule, ensure that the right actors have been called for the right scenes, to check that there aren't any clashes and to help James in editing the schedule if there are.

I have also been running private sessions with the actors on specific tasks within the play, such as cobbling and marching. The idea is that once this task has been taught to the actor it will free up more time with James to work on the detail and

acting of it, rather than the practicalities of the task itself.

Nevertheless, I could quite easily be doing none of the above and just be sitting in the room observing. I have been fortunate that James runs a very open rehearsal process and has delegated quite a lot of work to me, meaning that I have been very involved with the rehearsal process.

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WHY NOT? Re-create the table-work which James Dacre undertook with the Acting Company. Choose a scene from the play, set in Accrington. Each time you find a reference to the place or the period, try to find an image which will bring the time and place to life.

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WHY NOT? Read the first scene of THE ACCRINGTON PALS. Make a list of facts and questions. Your facts list should include things you know for certain having read the first scene. Your questions list should include anything you're not sure about, any thoughts the scene sparks for you or ideas you'd like to investigate further. Look over your list of questions: which questions might research help you with? Which questions would you need to explore in rehearsal through imagining the characters thoughts and feelings?



THE ACCRINGTON PALS (photo - Jonathan Keenan)

THE ACCRINGTON PALS runs at the Royal Exchange Theatre from 17 January - 16 February 2013.

Box Office: 0161 833 9833
royalexchange.co.uk/accrington

Introducing THE ACCRINGTON PALS
Tuesday 29 January, 10am – 12pm
Pre-Show Workshop for schools, community groups and individuals who have booked to see the show.
£8 / £6 (all concessions & group leaders);
Book on 0161 833 9833

2 x 2 Between The Lines (18yrs - adult)
Wednesdays 6 & 13 February, 11am – 1pm
A pair of discussion, playreading and talk-based sessions to accompany THE ACCRINGTON PALS.
£12 for 2 sessions; Book on 0161 833 9833