



THE ACCRINGTON PALS By Peter Whelan

Performed at [Royal Exchange](#) , Directed by James Dacre, Designed by Jonathan Fensom

Reviewed by [Emma Short](#) January 2013

Using the fond template and rich underpinnings of northern childhood memories **Peter Whelan** brings to life the stories of the men and women of

Accrington

during the push for volunteer recruits for the Somme offensives during

World War I

. Like many northern communities at the time, such as in Liverpool and Sheffield, it saw its young men go off to fight in Kitchener's Army, side by side with their pals to fight for King and Country, patriotic and motivated to do the right thing.

The first major action of the battalion known as the **Accrington Pals**, the attack on Serre on 1st July 1916, saw them suffer devastating losses, culminating in the deaths of almost a whole generation of young men that never returned. Out of around 720 of the

Accrington Pals

that enrolled 583 were killed, missing or wounded. The play brings to life the reality of these events and those leading up to them. It also follows the stories of the women of

Accrington

in their supporting roles, their newfound work roles, how they adjusted, and their desperate struggle to find out about their fighting men.

Whelan captures the **optimism, comradeship, and community support** in the excited celebratory marches. The bugle playing by neighbours, hailed the flood of thousands of recruits from the towns of Britain, like Accrington, at the beginning of World War One. With similar stoicism, the young

E

va

(

Sarah Ridgeway

) assures the love of her life

Ralph

(

Gerard Kearns

), that his arms are not too short for him to sign up, whilst tenderly bathing him in his tin bath amongst friends. We glimpse in the drunken musings of the working women too, the element of compulsion and air of disapproval conveyed towards men unable to fight - such as when

Bertha

's (

Laura Elsworthy

) asthmatic admirer who did not sign up (even if he is an electrician and probably worth a bob or two).

This same attitude towards the **cause of the greater good** is also present today. It is one whereby those in authority who sit above war, yet benefit from its capitalist paymasters, promote an unfair and undesirable policy approach to the **work capability tests**

. Thus when

CSM Rivers

(in a strong performance from

Simon Armstrong

) appears from the mist onto the cobbles, the sinister undertones to his generous nature and valiant cause cannot be ignored. He embodies the ideal of a driving force to change - one that faces the problem head on with no option of retreat, a paternalistic figure that will lead the boys and their country to victory on the Somme.



For the Accrington Pals, the pull factor of patriotism and the push factor of drudgery and poverty, broaden out the community spirit explanation, as is the case with the quite unassuming 19 year old **Tom** (*Robin Morrissey*) who **May** (*Emma Lowndes*) has eyes for. May runs a regimented, precise and successful, fruit and veg stall with the help of whoever is in need of work at the time - first her beloved Tom, then Eva, and finally

Reggie

(

Sean Aydon

).

May is the only character that does not agree with the ideal of war and thus stands opposed and outside of her neighbours' community spirit. She meets with CSM Rivers several times and understands the certainty of his actions, yet her money cannot buy her the guarantee that he will not take her beloved Tom away from her. Tom's socialist conviction that the sharing of goods and skills will mutually benefit all is displayed in his dedication to May, her stall and 'the cause' of the Pals. Tom's outlook embodies the comradeship that war brings to the young men, alongside the meaning provided by something greater than themselves. May's fearful cynicism is captured beautifully when she declares ' ***you live as a slave or die as a slave***' in her breathtakingly climatic scene with CSM Rivers and Tom towards the end of the play.

The journey we follow for the majority of the play within the living & working quarters of the sturdy and busy women of Accrington. It is set on the glistening cobbled street drowned in a dose of familiar Lancashire rain sprinkled generously from above and fills the theatre with a bleak sense of realism. In the second half of the production we are transported to the front line of the trenches to witness the tragic unfolding of the Accrington Pal's fate, under the orders of the masterful CSM Rivers. The set was transformed from a millworks by upturning the furniture, and through the use of dramatic lighting, sound and mist. The performances were both humorous and harrowing, and the accuracy of dialect brought the northern context alive alongside the fabulously effective cobbles, large pine laundry racks and sheets of the mills which descended as did the rain from the heavens. Truly, a fabulous show.

The Accrington Pals will be playing at the Royal Exchange until the 16th February.