**Voices of the Great War**

**Songs and Reminiscences of World War I from the Home Front and the Trenches**

**A Play for Schools**

**(23 speaking parts + limitless chorus/cast)**

As the audience enters the venue they will be greeted by the actors in costume assuming the role of recruitment officers. As they take their seats they will be given a program designed like a replica soldiers pay book.

Scene: A sparse stage with a piano hidden behind a mound of sandbags and barbed wire , an upturned Barrel or packing case to be used as a seat and a black board.

Mournful whistling the cast enters whistling tunes from the play and take their positions forming a backdrop of faces. (As each actor performs they move out from the crowd into the central performing space, only to quietly melt back into the sea of faces when finished. All the songs are performed by the whole cast unless otherwise stated)

**Narrator 1 *(in chatty informal voice*)** From the moment Britain went to war, on the 4th of August 1914, the great recruitment machine fired into action. Lord Kitchiner announced to the Nation…

**Lord Kitchener** Your country needs You!!

**Narrator 2** And the gallant hero’s of this fair Isle marched off to the Recruiting Offices. By the end of September over 750,000 men had enlisted, by January over one million.

**Lord K** Comrades in Arms, you have answered your countries call**.** As good patriots you come here today to stand together against our enemy, Kaiser Wilhelm the second of Germany. United we will fight against tyranny and oppression.There can be no rest until this cancer has been ripped out of European Society. The Germans will squeal like every bully when cornered. There must be no compromise, no shaking hands with the devil. It is useless to moralise with an alligator, kill it, that’s what I say. We shall make the Rhine whine.

**Narrator 1** Even the Women’s Sufferage Movement joined in the cry to enlist. Emmeline Pankhurst urged her members to hand out white feathers to men of military age not yet in uniform in a bid to shame them into service *(pull out white feather and in voice of Emmeline Pankhurst*)

We women must fight for our country as we fought for the vote. It is no longer a question of Votes for Women, but of having any country left to vote in. Men must fight, Women must work.

**Narrator 2** Popular Music Hall artistes of the time worked enthusiastically for recruitment. Harry Lauder and Marie Lloyd, to name but two, toured the halls recruiting young soldiers on stage, offering…

**Marie Lloyd** Ten Pounds for the first recruit tonight! Come on don’t be shy. Ten pounds for the first hero to step up here beside me. Come on Fellas I like my men in khaki *(wink*)

**The piano starts… Miss Lloyd joins in and sings**

**SONG “ ON SATURDAY I’M WILLING IF YOU’LL ONLY TAKE A SHILLING TO MAKE A MAN OF ANYONE OF YOU”**

***During song she flirts with the audience and tries to get audience to join in by pointing with pointer stick to the words of the song written on the black board***

**Marie L** Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to pull yourselves together and keep your peckers up. I have been told on good authority that the war will be over in six weeks! And you gentlemen will be welcomed home as heroes. We shall soon have the Hun on the run. We shall drive them out of France, out of Flanders and Belgium and back across the Rhine. We shall give them a taste of their own medicine. You my gallant boys in khaki shall keep our Nation free. YOU (*POINT)* my lads, you shall march us to Victory. Come on Harry (*address R at piano*) lets have another song….

**She goes to black board again to entreat audience to join in as the piano and chorus sing.**

**SING “THERE’LL ALWAYS BE AN ENGLAND”**

**Narrator 1** Such was the desire to serve their country that many boys lied about their age, so desperate were they to do their bit.

**Private bob** Private Bob Morris 12th Battalion, Middlesex Regiment.

It was seeing the picture of Kitchiner with his finger pointing at you that did it…any position you took up, that finger was always pointing at you…It was a wonderful poster really. I was always tall and fairly fit lad. When I confronted the recruiting officer though he said I was too young, although I had said that I was eighteen. He said “Come back in another year or so, when you’ve grown some hairs on that chest of yours”. So … I returned home and never said anything to my parents. I picked up my bowler hat, which my Mum had bought me to wear on Sundays ( *put on bowl hat*) Well when I looked in the mirror it made me look much older. So I practise a bit in front of mirror trying to look confident like… and I set’s off down the recruiting office again. This time I was accepted, no queries. Luckily my birth certificate was not asked for ..or I’d have been scuppered. They told me I was to report to Mill Hill next morning. My Mother wasn’t best pleased I’d just turned sixteen in june.

**school boy** I was seven the day the war started. I remember playing in the garden with my sister, my Grandmother came out to speak to us. She said….

**Grandma**  Toby. Dora, I have got something very serious to tell you. Something dreadful has happened. So listen really carefully. There is a war on, those wicked Germans, remember I told you about then? Well…they are being very naughty and we….we have to teach them a lesson. So we are at War. Now everyone is very sad so therefore there must be no playing, no singing and no running about”.

**School boy**  Grandma, is there going to be lots of fighting?

**Grandma**  Yes my love…but you mustn’t worry yourself about it. The fighting is going to be far, far away. Now Dora stop crying. You’re not in any danger…its just that everyone’s really sad, and we must be respectful. Now come inside now children. I’ve got a little job for you to do. I want you to go up to your nursery and make a pile of all your toys that have been made in Germany, we can’t have German things in the house anymore, it’s unpatriotic.

**School boy** Must we Grandma, my favourite train says Germany on the bottom. Can’t I keep it?...PLEASE?

**Grandma** No Toby! Give it to me! (she takes the train off him and walk away.)

**school boy** I don’t know what she did with all those toys, but I never saw them again….. After that we heard the khaki men were coming to take away all the horses from the village. We were told

After each day when we got home we had a lovely good wash. And believe you me, the water was blood red and our skin perfectly yellow1 right down through the body, legs, toenails even a perfect yellow! That’s why they called us “Canaries” coz of the yellow! In some girls it caused a nasty rash too, right round the jaw and chin, some of em had it half an inch thick poor devils. Our hair too, that changed colour.. If it was fair or brown it went a beautiful gold, but if you was grey then it went bright green! Bright grass Green!!! It took over twelve months after I’d left the factory before I finally got rid of the yellow!

We worked really hard, without a grumble.. one big happy family. It was amazing, I shall never forget it as long as I live the way those women worked and talked and chatted… about their boys at the front…it was them we were worried about see…that’s what made us work like that. ***(Take off hat adopt a different accent***)

**Narrator 2**  Life for our soldiers in the trenches was far from comfortable, made worse by the atrocious weather! For example during the winter of 1914 from October through to March there were only 18 days without rain! The trenches filled with water, many men drowning in the mud!

**Soldier 1** Hell is not fire; Hell is mud! Tenaciously it stuck to us, a curious kind of sucking mud, like liquid porridge. Through the winter of ’14 weariness, water and mud were our chief enemies. Stinking water seeped endlessly out of the walls and rose up around our boots, making our feet rot. The earth refused to keep its shape or stay still, each day destroying what had just been repaired. Occasionally it created cave ins, bringing old horrors back to light. The dead seemed to close in then, occasionally pushing out a hand or booted foot, all ragged and black. W had to hold our noses. The smell of damp earth walls, rotting planks, of mud impregnated with gas and decaying corpses. The rains kept on filling our trenches, in some places many feet deep. Some poor blighters slipped in and drowned. They couldn’t even be seen, but were trodden on later. Hell on earth it was, Hell on earth.

**Narrator 2** Surrounded by such horror it is not surprising their morale and initial patriotic fervour dwindled. For many the horror’s of war was all too clear.

***The piano starts to play and soldier 1 sings solo of song after a while the chorus and audience joins in..***

**SING “WHEN THIS LOUSY WAR IS OVER”**

**Narrator 1** On trying to describe his surroundings one soldier wrote…

**Soldier 2** “All the countryside was a wilderness. From the crest of the ridges, mile upon mile was visible and everywhere the land lay utterly waste and desolate. Not a green thing survived the harrowing of the shells. Constant barrages had churned the land into a vast desert of shell craters, like the foul pock-markings of disease. This blasted land, lifeless, arid and accursed”

The daily torture and discomfort of life in the trenches was increasingly hard to bear.

**Soldier 3** Fleas! Lice! Oh yes we were infested with them. They used to get into the seam of your underclothes, the only way to get rid of them was to get a lit candle and run it along the seams, you could hear the blighter’s eggs cracking! The lice were so bad, I’ve seen men take off their shirts to reveal the skin of their backs red raw where they’d been scratching! We used to get sent a chemical called Harrisons Pomade, but it didn’t really work. There were delousing centres behind the line. We’d get into this sort of canister of hot water to have a bath. Then we’d get into another to be deloused. Then we were given a new set of clothes. But you were never free of the blighters for long. You couldn’t get a good nights sleep not only because of the shelling and lack of space but cause of the itching, would drive you to a frenzy! The only way to cope was to keep busy…. I’m itching just talking about it. Lets sing another song.. you can join if you like might take your minds off the itching!

**Chorus begins singing with gusto as soldier 2 and 3 play leapfrog on stage.**

**SONG “THEY WERE ONLY PLAYING LEAP FROG”**

***After the song Soldier 4 enters carrying ration tin and shouting “Grubs up” Then the Narrator will announce that there will be short interval during which the audience can get a drink.***

***During the interval there will be a medley of songs played on the piano.***

**INTERVAL**

**Soldier 4** MMMmmm lovely bully beef and biscuits and a tot of rum, the staple diet of us soldiers. Will you join me in singing another song? I have a lovely one for you, you’ll like it….

**The Chorus sings with gusto**

**SONG “A QUARTER MASTERS STORES”**

**Mother** Got a letter from my Billy the other day, oh e’s a goodun that one. Never wants to upset ‘is old ma, ‘is letters are always upbeat. To be honest I’m sure e’s hiding a lot but…that’s how ‘e is, God bless im! Allus putting t’others before ‘im self. He’s somewhere in France on’t front line, ‘e says it’s not bad, everyone does their best ta keep their spirits up, look out fa one another. He says worst thing is the rats!... here I’ll read it ta ya…… (Looks through letter then reads) “ “Ma ya should see the size of tha rats! Oh crikey! If ya put em in a harness they could do a milk round!They are as large as small dogs, some o them. I line up mi sights and use em as target practise! Dad would be proud o me”…. (laughs…then more serious) I suppose we never will know the truth, will we? Of what they’re go’int through?...

Elsie dow’nt road, ‘er son come back on’t leave… e was like a ghost, a shadow o imself. Oh e tried is best, smiled , even made a joke occasionally..but it felt hollow somehow…like nothing was funny ta im no more. Ya got feelin e was restless, like e could’nt wait ta get back ta France, ta is pals… Oh I worry so… Ya see em limpin back home, some terribly scarred and wounded, thas if they come home at all! There’s tha butchers lad, is name escapes mi. Poor might, got badly injured, I think it wor at Pashendale…shell blew is leg off… es a wooden one now, would’nt think it ta look at im, they’re very clever these days , doctors. But it is head that’s not right… Sometimes e goes all stiff and then e starts sort of shakin…Its as if he’s reliving sommat… Some people stare… but old Mr Patten e tries to distract em, you know carries on servin , while is poor lad shakes and twitches…. It doesn’t last long… poor might!.................I just couldn’t bear it if our Billy…….

I must pull missen together.. Lets have a song.. how about Keep the Home Fires Burnin?

**The chorus begins to hum tune then the piano joins in finally the chorus sings….**

**SONG “KEEP THE HOME FIRES BURNING”**

**Soldier 5** The routine kept us sane of course, broke up the monotony, the boredom of waiting. Trench life followed a clear pattern. The day would begin an hour before dawn with the morning “Stand too” .. everyone fixing their bayonets and taking their positions , the infantrymen climbing upon the fire step. Everyone readying themselves to guard against a possible enemy attack. As the light grew around us the daily ritual would continue with the “Morning Hate”. When both sides, relieve their tensions by indiscriminately firing and shelling at each other across the mist. Most raids, you see come at dawn. With ones ears ringing from the barrage of bullets it is time for breakfast, bully beef and buiscuits or if your lucky bacon! and a mug of tea to wet your whistle. Then weapon cleaning and inspection, the platoon officer and sergeant barking orders at you as you stand to attention weighed down by your mud