

‘Are there any more recruits?’ - British Theatre and the recruitment drive, 1914-1915

This paper argues that British theatre-makers played an important role in recruiting men to the armed forces in 1914 and 1915. It identifies a progression from the use of extra-dramatic interventions in the first weeks of the war, to the blurring of boundaries between stage and auditorium, drawing on plays such as *In Time of War*, *A Call to Arms* and *England Expects*. It ends with an examination of the messages promulgated in these recruiting dramas.

Examining a range of plays addressing both men’s reluctance to enlist, and women’s reluctance to let their men enlist, the paper argues that recruiting plays offered a far more sophisticated response to the experience of enlisting than has previously been recognised.

Keywords: theatre; drama; recruitment; enlistment, Britain; women; 1914; mobilisation, atrocities

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‘Playwrights have missed a golden opportunity during the past year in not evolving a stirring recruiting drama after the style, for instance, of ‘The Englishman’s Home’ announced a critic in the *Edinburgh Evening News* on 8 October 1915. Guy du Maurier’s successful invasion play, first performed at Wyndham’s Theatre, London, in January 1909, had been a cultural reference point in debates over military service for the last five years.¹ As such, it was an obvious benchmark for recruiting plays of the early war years. Yet whilst, as this critic pointed out, there was no single, stand-out, ‘hit’ recruiting play during the Great War, there *was* nationwide theatrical engagement with the topic, with a number of successful dramas rallying audiences in the cause of recruitment.

To date, little attention has been paid to these works. Largely this is the result of such works being seen, in Heinz Kosok’s words, as having the temporary and ‘crude appeals’ of agit-prop.² Gordon Williams similarly argues that whilst the theatre played a ‘conspicuous part in creating a warmongering [society]’ and turning ‘many young men from civilians into soldiers’, this was the result of a ‘thick-textured orchestration of propaganda’ and the use of ‘every devious trick’ to secure recruits.³ Only in L. J. Collins’s study of wartime theatre, and more recently in Steve Nicholson’s essay on 1914 plays, is there any recognition of the drama’s role in the wider context of national mobilisation.

This essay builds on the groundwork begun by Collins and Nicholson but moves beyond the London-centric focus of these earlier works to offer a wider analysis of theatrical recruiting, drawing on data from the Great War Theatre project database.⁴ In doing so it reflects both the regional turn in theatre history as well the importance of a regional focus within military histories of recruitment.⁵ Rather than dismissing theatrical recruiting efforts on the basis of their propagandistic qualities and ‘tricks’, I focus new attention onto these elements in order to analyse the recurrent themes, dramatic devices, and theatrical

conventions which were marshalled by theatre-makers in the cause of recruitment. Not only do I make a claim for the important role theatres played in recruiting men to the armed forces but I demonstrate, for the first time, how theatres undertook this recruiting role, through the drama as well as through extra-dramatic interventions. Steve Nicholson has argued that in the early months of the war almost any war-themed play could be considered a recruiting play.⁶ My interest here, however, is specifically in dramatic devices and representations which directly and explicitly encouraged voluntary enlistment. As such my analysis is limited to the new plays which were licensed by the Lord Chamberlain for production in England, Scotland and Wales between 1 August 1914 and 31 December 1915.⁷ Some of these are full-length works, but most are one-act dramas and sketches which were produced quickly and which could be inserted into a multi-act bill. Drawing on contemporary newspapers to gain insights into theatrical production and performative affect, the result is a nationwide picture of both the extent to which theatres and theatre-makers engaged with recruiting efforts, and of the techniques they mobilized in order to do so.

Extra-Dramatic Devices

Theatres became bound up with the mobilisation of the armed forces from the moment war broke out. Five days after war was declared, the Ardwick Empire in Manchester was repurposed as a temporary base for the Manchester Artillery, with 600 men sleeping in the theatre on Saturday 8 and Sunday 9 August 1914.⁸ That same weekend, theatres and music halls across Manchester were part of a city-wide testing of the call to Territorials, with men being scattered over the city on the Saturday and then recalled using announcements made from theatres, music halls and picture palaces.⁹ Theatres also took on new dual-functions as recruiting stations: as early as the third week of the war, a recruiting station was opened in the lobby of a theatre in Bath, probably the Theatre Royal.¹⁰

In the second week of the war, and well before the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee was established on 31 August with the express purpose of boosting military recruitment, theatres and theatre-makers across the country had already begun to mobilise their assets - both spatial and performative - in the cause of recruitment. Theatres were obvious venues for recruiting events, one early example of which was the international gathering at the Scala, London, on 11 August, which enlisted 500 men for the Foreign Legion.¹¹ Actor-managers on tour also recognised their potential to aid the war effort. At the outbreak of war actor-manager John Martin-Harvey, recently returned from a well-publicised Canadian tour, was about to begin his new, and to date largest, national tour.¹² The main pieces to be performed were *The Breed of the Treshams* and *The Only Way*. Yet less than one month into his tour, he had developed a new performance specifically aimed at encouraging recruitment. Drawing on his experience in giving lectures aimed at raising funds for a Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, the first of Martin-Harvey's 'War Lectures', as they became known, took place on Sunday 7 September at Middlesbrough.¹³ Lectures is a misnomer. Given on Sunday nights in theatres where his company was on tour, these were performances in which Martin-Harvey, in his own words, 'coated the pill with musical selections and whatever local or travelling talent we could capture', as well as, where possible, with the presence of Boer and even Crimean War veterans.¹⁴ So successful were his efforts, that in Liverpool Martin-Harvey was given the badge of a recruiting sergeant and made an Honorary Lieutenant for 'services in recruiting'.¹⁵

Whilst Martin-Harvey's recruiting activities are relatively well-known, he was not the only actor spending 'their spare time *acting* as recruiting sergeants'.¹⁶ Lewis Waller, an actor-manager best known for his roles in swashbuckling romances, was fifty-three and too old to enlist when war broke out. Yet touring with the popular *Monsieur Beaucaire* - an adaptation of Booth Tarkington's short novel, set in eighteenth-century Bath - gave him the opportunity

of ‘playing the part [...] of recruiting sergeant for Lord Kitchener’s Army’.¹⁷ Whereas Martin-Harvey’s ‘War Lectures’ were performances in their own right and separate to the dramas he was performing in, Waller’s recruiting efforts – which took the form of patriotic speeches (such as from *Henry V*) and readings of Kipling war poems – were performative interventions which were inserted into the evening, or afternoon’s performance. These kinds of extra-dramatic recruiting scenes soon became familiar in theatres across the country, and were performed not only by actors but also by local dignitaries and military figures. During a variety show featuring ‘Six Brown Bros’ and ‘Leipzig, the Incomparable Conjuror’ at the Birmingham Grand on 12 August 1914, Colonel Ludlow made a call for recruits: asking the audience at both the matinée and evening performances to repeat an oath binding them to assist in raising the second army. The response was reported to be overwhelming and Ludlow went on to repeat the patriotic call eighteen times at different local theatres over the following week.¹⁸ Similar calls were made in the south. At the hurriedly-summoned meeting which inaugurated the Ramsgate Recruiting Committee in Kent, Captain Inskip’s suggestion that short appeals for recruits be made from all places of amusement was unanimously agreed. Following this, on Wednesday 12 August, speeches were made at the Royal Palace Theatre, the Royal Victoria Pavilion, and the King’s Theatre. Being told that ‘the path of duty was pointed out and laid before them clear and strong’ and asked ‘Would they answer?’, the young men in the audience were reported to have responded enthusiastically.¹⁹

An account from a performance at the King’s Theatre, Southsea, Portsmouth, indicates one way in which these appeals were presented. Midway through the programme, which included the Great Yamamoto, a troupe of Japanese acrobats, and a performance of *The Night of the Wedding*, a message was flashed on the screen reading:

Your King and Country Need you.

Lord Kitchener Wants you.

Come and enlist

A recruiting sergeant-major then stepped onto the stage and gave a short speech about local enlistment. It was well-received by audiences and was repeated for the rest of the month, being described as the 'Southsea Sandwich': a term which suggests both a disjoint between the dramatic entertainments and the patriotic appeals inserted between them, as well as a result which was different and greater than the sum of its individual parts.²⁰

In fact, however, at this performance at the King's on 21 August, the war was not as absent as the 'Southsea Sandwich' label might suggest. Not only was Charles Seymour on the bill performing national and patriotic songs but the audience also had the opportunity to see the latest war films.²¹ Rousing the audience's patriotism through film and music, and then prompting them to action through the extra-dramatic appeal, the production, to draw on Adrian Gregory's description of recruiting meetings, 'created an atmosphere in which volunteering was seen as the appropriate act'.²² It also made the first steps towards using the blurring of stage and auditorium.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

By early-September 1914, playwrights were beginning to experiment with plays in which the patriotic appeal for recruits was embedded within the world of the performance, whether through blurring the boundary of the footlights, or through the integration of multi-media. Charles Watson Mill's 'stirring military drama', *In Time of War*, a four-act play which has been almost entirely forgotten, is the first play in which this crossing is evident.²³ Described as 'the new military drama on the present crisis' the play dealt with 'the outbreak of war, England's unpreparedness, German espionage, Belgian gallantry, the cooperation of our French ally, [and] the outrages in Belgium'.²⁴ It premiered at the Theatre Royal, South Shields on 14 September 1914, with the author in the lead role, and went on to great success,

being toured by two companies to more than forty-eight theatres across Britain over the next eighteen months, as well as having a stint at the Lyceum London.²⁵

From as early as *In Time of War's* second week, when it was being performed at the Queen's, Leeds, it was clear that the play was being framed as a means of encouraging enlistment. 'During the progress of the play stress is laid on the urgent need for recruits to fill the numerous gaps caused by casualties' reported the *Leeds Mercury* on 22 September, adding that 'at the interval, last night, Mr Mill, supported by two recruiting sergeants, gave a speech urging the immediate necessity for young men joining the ranks'.²⁶ At the end of the performance these recruiting sergeants were also poised to sign up enthused young men as they left the theatre. It was a significant moment. For the first time – other than at the 1909 premiere of *An Englishman's Home* where a Territorials recruiting booth had been set up in the foyer²⁷ – audiences were presented with the opportunity to take real-world action, after being inspired by the fictional action of the play. Whether every performance of *In Time of War* included on-site recruiting officers is unclear, yet Mill certainly continued his practice of the interval recruiting appeal in subsequent performances, including at the Theatre Royal, Jarrow (w/c Monday 16 Nov 1914) where he listed the numbers who had enlisted in the Tyneside battalions and encouraged men in the audience to join them.²⁸ So successful was he with these appeals that when the production premiered in London on 22 May 1915, after sixteen weeks' on tour, Mills claimed that it had already been responsible for bringing over 4,000 recruits to the forces.²⁹

The validity of Mills' claim (or indeed where he got his figures from) is difficult to evidence, yet the production is notable not only for its apparent success in mobilising men to enlist, but also for the theatrical techniques being developed and deployed in the cause of recruitment. When Mills stepped 'out' (of both character and of the stage's fictional world) to make his interval speeches, he was making an extra-dramatic intervention much like those

discussed in the previous section. Yet unlike in those plays which were disconnected from the war, here Mills embedded his appeal within a production in which current events - and the need for men - were dramatised and referenced. The drama became the main means of appeal, with the interval's recruiting intervention serving to capture spectators' affective responses and transform them into real-world action. As such the line between the fictional world and real-life began to blur.

One week after *In Time of War* premiered in South Shields another play took this blurring of the fictional and real one step further. *A Call to Arms* premiered at the Chelsea Palace on 21 September 1914 and went on to be performed at both the Glasgow Pavilion and London Palladium.³⁰ Written by Bertrand Davis and set in a quintessentially English village-green, this one-act sketch encapsulates what Frans Coetzee has described as the rural 'southern metaphor'.³¹ Into this idyllic vision of English country life populated by archetypal villagers - including a cricketer, a young mother, and a curate - comes a recruiting sergeant singing 'Come, my lad, and be a soldier'. Initially he is faced with overwhelming reluctance, yet by drawing on rhetorical themes, which will be discussed in more detail in the following section, the recruiting sergeant ultimately convinces the men to do their duty. 'Europe is talking in millions today' he proclaims to one man's protest that 'We've recruited a hundred thousand men already' (6), echoing the message being heard across the country, including at an outdoor recruiting meeting in Whitstable, Kent, that week, where men were told by Lord Harris that whilst 'they might say we had enlisted 500,000 men. [...] we wanted 500,000 more'.³² Providing a direct dramatic mouthpiece for arguments which could be heard outside the theatre, the aim of *Call to Arms* was unambiguous: to show characters enlisting on stage in order to convince men in the audience to do the same.

Simple and direct in both content and style *Call to Arms* came 'under the description of a recruiting sketch, as the moral to be drawn is that every physically fit young man should

at once join the colours'.³³ Perhaps this simplicity explains why a play which was hyperbolically labelled as 'Britain's Greatest Patriotic Sketch' is almost entirely left out of the history of theatrical recruitment.³⁴ Yet like *In Time of War*, this long-overlooked work offers a fascinating insight into the ways in which playwrights were blurring the lines between the stage and auditorium in the service of recruitment: here through the final line of the play, spoken by the fictional recruiting sergeant as a direct address to the audience. Having just convinced the characters on stage to enlist, and following an encore of 'Come, my lad, and be a soldier,' the recruiting sergeant, played in 1914 by the well-known actor Bertram Wallis, then turns to address the men in the audience. 'Gentlemen' he declares, 'I am asked by the Authorities to state that a Recruiting Officer is in attendance in the vestibule of the building. Is there any man here tonight who can and will help his country in her hour of need?'³⁵ In this metatheatrical moment, Wallis both made a direct appeal for recruits in line with his role as the recruiting officer, and also stepped out of character to direct attention to the real recruiting officers in the theatre. It was a fleeting yet powerful moment, enhanced by being followed a third chorus of 'Come, my lad'. Men certainly seem to have responded. When the production toured to Glasgow in late November, readers were informed that Wallis had been thanked by the army for 'the splendid results his patriotic sketch has had in London' and the production only finally closed in December when Wallis went into rehearsal for his Drury Lane pantomime debut.³⁶

The recruiting success of the two-month run of *A Call to Arms* was far outdone by the shorter but higher-profile three-week run of *England Expects*. Written by playwright Edward Knoblauch and playwright-actor Seymour Hicks, who also starred in the production, *England Expects* premiered at the London Opera House, Kingsway, under the management of Charles B. Cochran on 17 September 1914. The play drew its name from Nelson's iconic signal at Trafalgar, 'England Expects that every man will do his duty' which was being used across

recruiting posters and in newspapers, as well as being the title of the widely promoted patriotic film being shown in picture houses.³⁷ In the event that audiences were left in any doubt as to its purpose, the play was also subtitled ‘a recruiting play’. It was an entirely appropriate sub-title since every aspect of the dramaturgy and production of *England Expects* was designed to enhance recruitment. As well as being performed three times each day, at 2.30pm, 7pm and 9pm, with the entire production running for barely an hour, prices were far lower than standard: the gallery were entirely free, and the most expensive seats in the boxes were 2s 6d.³⁸ To enable such reductions, as well as to ensure that no accusations of profiteering could be levelled at the company, neither Cochran, Hicks or Knoblauch - who readers were informed was an Englishman by Dutch descent, although this did not stop him deciding to change his name later in the war - took a fee for their work.³⁹ Many of the staff and company also worked for free: a practice which whilst effective in lowering prices, was only sustainable due to the short length of the run.⁴⁰

The intensity of the run and the affordability of tickets was designed to draw large numbers of spectators to the 2,660-seater theatre, which was adorned with allied flags. Yet it was the production itself which transformed men in the audience into recruits. With no plot, barring the loose depiction of the efforts of a recruiting sergeant to transform men from slackers to soldiers, *England Expects* drew on the familiar model of the military tattoo to create, as the Stage put it, an ‘exhilaratingly patriotic stimulus of an entertainment’.⁴¹ The entire structure of the production was designed to provoke spectators to action. On arrival audiences were met with a concert of military music in the lobby, given by a Guards Band.⁴² Sitting down they were then regaled with war pictures showing the army in peacetime, probably taken from the popular *The British Army Film* (1913); orchestral performances of ‘martial and nautical airs’; and a recitation of Kipling’s ‘England’s Answer’ and ‘Erbert the Bank Clerk’ by Esme Beringer.⁴³ At certain performances prominent actors also recited ‘The

Charge of the Light Brigade' and other 'appropriate poems'.⁴⁴ The appropriateness of a poem commemorating a disastrous military failure as part of a recruiting event is perhaps difficult to see. Yet considered, as Jerome McGann has influentially argued, 'not so much a commentary on the war and British foreign policy in the Crimea as it is a eulogy of the British character', or more so, a celebration of the spirit of the British soldier and their 'do and die' attitude, its appropriateness becomes more evident.⁴⁵ The 'do and die' attitude, as we will see in the following section, was also a consistent, if to modern eyes unexpected, theme of recruiting dramas.

Once the performance 'proper' began, it led the spectator through the process of enlisting and serving across its five scenes, which were appropriately entitled: I) Slacking, II) Cheering, III) Enlisting, IV) Marching, and V) 'Fighting'. Within this structure Hicks and Knoblauch interwove scripted scenes set in familiar, nearby locations (a fashionable grill-room in scene I, and the nearby Wellington Barracks in scene III); with dumb shows of fighting in the trenches accompanied with shell effects and rifle fire; projected portraits of the various allied heads of state; cinematographic pictures showing London recruits drilling and battleships going to sea; and footage, courtesy of Jury's Imperial Bioscope, showing British cavalry, Indian troops, Bengal Lancers, and Horse Artillery.⁴⁶ The resulting production – which the *Tatler* described on 30 September as 'enough to stir the martial ardour of a confirmed neurasthenic'⁴⁷ – was something akin to a theatrical Royal Tournament. And 'to catch the youth before the ardour cools', as in *In Time of War*, recruiting sergeants and doctors were ready in the foyer so that men 'anxious to answer their country's call may enlist on the spot'.⁴⁸

The affective power of the production was not, however, purely the result of bombarding the audience with patriotic music, spectacular scenes, and moving recitations; it was also achieved through the sophisticated blurring of the boundaries of stage and

auditorium. Through interweaving real-life war footage, dramatic battle scenes described by one reviewer as ‘a triumph of realism’, and scripted scenes set in familiar surroundings, Knoblauch and Hicks resisted any clear line between fiction and reality and created an experience which felt both alive and current.⁴⁹ This experimentation with the stage/auditorium boundary reached its zenith in Scene III: Enlisting, set outside Wellington Barracks. The scene begins with Eustace, played in 1914 by Seymour Hicks, successfully encouraging men outside the barracks to sign up, whilst a recruiting sergeant, played by at the time by Herbert Evans, takes down their names. After Eustace himself enlists, the stage directions then indicate that the recruiting sergeant is to call out the following announcement:

As some misapprehension appears the Army Council desire to make known that any man enlisting in the Army under the present conditions will be discharged with all speed possible the minute the war is over whether this lasts 3 weeks or 3 years.

Should the war last 3 years then continuance of service will be optional. (III:9)

Written within the stage directions, rather than as scripted dialogue, Evans appears to have been directed to step out of character to address the men sitting in the auditorium, whilst his next line of character dialogue, ‘Now then, won’t you join’ (III:9), could have been played both to those on and off the stage. The dual direction of the recruiting sergeant’s lines is echoed moments later, when Ruby, played by Elsie Margetson, asks ‘Are there any more recruits for the King. Are there any more’, and Isobel Elsom, playing the lead of Lady Mary Winthroppe adds ‘Don’t be afraid. Come on we want all we can get’ (III:11). In response, a man in the audience calls out ‘I’ll come Miss’ whilst another character adds ‘I will come too if you like. Mayn’t I come’. It is clear from the stage directions – ‘Two or three men come over and go to the table and sign; (III:11) – that this moment of apparent spectorial enthusiasm was carefully scripted. Reviewers of the early performances were, however,

unsure as to whether these men were genuine recruits or not. ‘A touch of realism was imparted by three occupants of stall seats also giving their names’ reported the *Manchester Courier*, whilst the *Globe’s* reviewer commented:

*If one might believe his eyes, half a dozen stalwart youths in the audience were so moved by the simple appeal of the dramatists that they rushed from their seats and impulsively gave their names as soldiers of the King to the convenient recruiting sergeant on the stage.*⁵⁰

Whether those enthused young men were genuine or not, there was at least one occasion on which a young man in the audience was roused to immediate action, as Knoblauch recorded in his autobiography.⁵¹

With real-life recruiting sergeants in the auditorium, fictional recruiting sergeants on stage voicing the words of their real counterparts; fictional recruits in the audience, and direct address to the audience, the playful blurring of the boundaries between stage and auditorium in *England Expects* appears to have been successful in prompting men to action. In its first ten days more than 500 men were reported to have signed up with the recruiting sergeants posted in the theatre.⁵² At an average of 17 men per performance, at first this figure might not sound significant; by comparison, in mid-August, a large patriotic meeting at Deal, Kent, had recruited 37 men from more than 2000.⁵³ Yet with many in the audience being women, or ineligible men, and no evidence around how many men were inspired to sign up days or even weeks later, the impact of *England Expects* should not be dismissed. As Simkins points out moreover, the importance of recruiting activities lay not in the number of men produced but in the ‘cumulative effect on recruiting figures’, something which the three-week run of *England Expects* certainly contributed to.⁵⁴

Dramatic Rhetoric

As demonstrated in the previous section, in the first six months of the war theatre-makers blurred the boundaries between stage and auditorium to encourage men to enlist. In this final part of the essay I turn to the messages contained within the dramatic works themselves. At the heart of all recruiting plays were persuasive messages not only about why men and women should support the recruiting effort, but also about how they could do this. As such these plays brought to life, developed, and in some cases even undermined the recruiting rhetoric being promulgated throughout society in the early months of the war.

The irony of all recruiting plays was that in order to articulate the pro-enlistment message, playwrights had to create characters who were at best reluctant, or at worst refused to do their duty. As such these plays also offer a valuable insight not only into the rhetoric used to convince men and women to support recruitment, but also the reasons why they might resist it. These reasons are particularly well expressed in *Call to Arms* and *England Expects*. In the former the recruiting sergeant is faced with a man who is doing well in business, about to get married and feels it enough to ‘take great interest in the European situation’ (2); one who will defend his home when he needs to (6), and another who points out that the target of over one hundred thousand has been met (6). In *England Expects*, a navy feels that ‘the Empire won’t stand or fall ‘cause o’ me’ (III:1); a loafer wants to know what he’ll get out of enlisting (III:2); and others are worried about their wives and children or losing their jobs. These realistic, understandable concerns are sharply contrasted by those given by the London ‘nuts’ who point out that as the servants have been sent there will be no-one left to carry on at home (I:2), feel there is ‘plenty of time’ (I:5), and are concerned that there will be no-one left to shoot the grouse (I:2).

The main concern expressed across all recruiting plays, however, is the fear of being killed. It is a fear best expressed by Worm in Nita Faydon’s one-act drama *Heroes, Every*

One of Them, written to be performed at the Royal Court, London, on 21 December 1914. Set in the kitchen of a wealthy household, the play is populated entirely by the labouring classes. Into this setting comes a young man from the local oil shop, anxious to talk to Ethel, the cook, about the fear that is preventing him enlisting. Being a soldier is ‘hell – hell’ he tells her:

- with the shells aburstin’ and the bullets whizzing past you and through you - and the cold steel bayonet splitting you through. Gaud! What them coves suffers and endures - they’re heroes, every one - not a grumble, not a grouse, legs blown off - arms crushed - blinded some - and they die by thousands, thousands, with no cry of regret, only sorry their little part in the great war is over. [...] I feel I ought to go - but I’m afraid. (14-15)

Worms’s graphic articulation of the fear of being wounded and dying, and his awareness that he cannot live up to the masculine ideal of heroic sacrifice, is unusual in recruiting plays and perhaps the reason *Heroes* appears never to have been performed. Yet whilst most recruiting plays did not go into such visceral detail, equally they did not ignore the fact that enlisting entailed the possibility of dying. *England Expects* as we have already seen, was sometimes preceded by a dramatic recital of the ‘disaster poem’, ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’, whilst the final scene depicted the shooting of soldiers in such a way that the *Tatler* considered it liable to bring ‘second thoughts into the mind of even the most brave’.⁵⁵

Rather than ignoring the risk of death, recruiting plays acknowledged and gave voice to this fear. In doing so, however, they did not justify it as an excuse for ‘slacking’ but presented it as the only choice that a ‘real man’ – i.e. not a coward – could make. As Ethel tells Worm in *Heroes*, a heroic death was better than surviving by not fighting. ‘We’ve all got

to die once and only once' she tells him 'Isn't it better to die for something, than wait for old age or illness to creep with you into your grave. There's not much glory in that' (16). In a similar tone, the recruiting sergeant in *Call to Arms* points out to one reluctant villager, 'You won't live forever under any circumstances. If you are killed you won't worry about it. If you are not killed you'll be jolly pleased. Anyway you'll be a hero instead of a coward' (5). In *England Expects* Eustace asks those around him to consider what would be worse: 'when it is all over and we have won the fight, to lose your life for your country - or to have to slink down a back alley - ashamed to face the fellows that have done the work' (I:9). For the soldier in *The Call*, a sketch set in the aftermath of an air raid and first performed at the Tivoli, Manchester on 24 May 1915, men may be 'Alive one hour, dead t'next' but 'they'll never die. They'll live for ever. 'istory will say 'they were true men. They answered to the call' (15).⁵⁶ Presenting a binary choice between being a 'true' man/hero or an emasculated coward, dying was presented as a risk which had to be accepted if a man were to fulfill his masculine potential. Where Samuel Hynes has suggested that the war was seen as a purge of society, these plays, on the contrary, suggest that the war presented an opportunity for weak or effete men to be 'reborn' through accepting the risk of death.⁵⁷ It is a choice depicted effectively in Edward Knoblauch's *The Way to Win*, first staged at the London Coliseum on 14 June 1915, where the young sculptor, played by Owen Nares, is told that he will only become a man and be able to complete his sculpture of Victory if he enlists.⁵⁸ More dramatically, in Faydon's *Heroes* Worm's decision to enlist is shown to physically, as well as emotionally, transform him from a thin, dirty, greasy boy with bent knees into a strong and attractive man who can literally and metaphorically stand erect. It is a transformation which comes with immediate rewards as Ethel then rejects her former sweetheart – a slacker - and promises herself instead to Worm.

Throughout recruiting plays the decision to enlist – and in doing so become a man –

was rewarded both romantically and sexually: as Mary says to her sweetheart Eustace in *England Expects*, she will give him the King's shilling 'and myself with it, if you like' (III:14). This rhetoric was nothing new. As Kate MacDonald has pointed out, the idea that military service would be rewarded by women's affection and sexual services within marriage goes back as far as Homer.⁵⁹ Yet in a reversal of plays like Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* where sex is used to *end* the Peloponnesian War, in Great War recruiting plays women were shown as using their marital and sexual assets in order to *encourage* men to enlist. It was their patriotic duty, these plays suggest, to give their affections to men who were enlisting, or withhold them from those who refused. 'We Women of England have only one duty', declares Mary in *England Expects*:

- Recruiting! Not one of us shall be seen about with any man who is fit and able to go and does not. Not one of us will have anything to do with such a man - no matter how much we may care for him. (I:10)

This rejection of the 'slacker' is seen most explicitly in *The Call*. Yet here it is not simply patriotic duty which makes the unnamed Woman reject her fiancé: rather his refusal to enlist has transformed her feelings for him. 'You've no place here' she tells him 'You're out of it. You don't count. I loved you. But that's done with [...] Love and trust go hand in hand. How can I trust myself, my life to you? You can't stand the test (3). As she tells the soldier who arrives soon after she simply 'can't marry a coward' (7).

For men who enlisted, these plays make clear, the rewards were intimate and personal: as were the consequences for those who did not. Yet for the women the reward was figured in patriotic terms. 'Oh, and to think I own a part of the King's army' (26) Ethel exclaims in *Heroes* as she watches Worm – the man she helped make into a soldier – march away. As in J. M. Barrie's poignant 1917 comedy *Charwomen and the War, or the Old Lady*

Shows Her Medals, here the social credit gained by having a man at the front might sit somewhat uncomfortably alongside the promise of romantic devotion, but it also offered a counterweight to the sacrifice being made by the women being left behind.

Recognition of what was described in Frederick Melvill's *One Way of War* (Brixton Theatre, first perf. 12 October 1914), as the harder and 'greater task' of women 'to see those we love fighting for us' (2) is threaded throughout recruiting plays, as well as being directly addressed in a number of plays targeting women's, rather than men's failure to do their patriotic duty. In these plays, which depict women reluctant to let their men enlist, women's fears are publicly articulated, addressed and usually resolved. As in the male-centered plays, ultimately the protagonists have to be transformed into dutiful subjects. Yet whilst a 'woman's part', these plays make clear, is to 'give up all she holds dear in life' (*One Way*, 2), women are not shamed into this position, as they could be by recruiting posters. Rather, in making space for the female experience, these recruiting plays allow for the tension between patriotic duty and personal feelings to be explored.

One of the earliest of these female-centred recruiting dramas is Jeanette Sherwin's *John Shannon, Reservist*. Intended for performance at the Empire, Shoreditch on 5 September 1914, the play, despite its title, centres on the reservist's wife, Nellie. Traumatized by the loss of her father in an unnamed earlier war, Nellie is reluctant to let her husband enlist and hides the telegram calling him up. As she tells her young child, in a poignant speech which refuses patriotic rhetoric, when her father went to war:

My poor Mother couldn't bear to let him go, and I only thought how grand it was that he should go and fight for his country. Oh, but later, when he never came back and we waited and waited [...] then I learnt to be afraid of this horrible thing - this war [...] I can't bear to see them, such splendid strong fellows, all going away full of life and hope, like my father, and never coming back. (1)

Throughout the play it is Nellie's fears and desperation to hold onto her present happiness which dominates. Even the moment of transformation, when her daughter's rendition of 'Rule Britannia' makes her realise the errors of her ways, is not entirely convincing. 'England must be kept safe and honoured, and every man counts, every man and every woman', Nellie tells her husband poignantly, 'but oh, it isn't easiest for the women' (6). It is a moment which foreshadows the lines of Lawrence Binyon's poem 'To the Women', which was put to music by Elgar in 1916:

For you, you too, to battle go,

Not with the marching, drums and cheers

But in the watch of solitude

And thro' the boundless night of fears.⁶⁰

Refusing a neat patriotic ending, in which Nellie's fears are entirely overcome in the national cause, instead Sherwin presents a woman who is prepared to do her duty despite knowing what the future might hold. It is hardly an uplifting ending and it is perhaps not surprising that it appears to have gone unperformed.

Offering a more heartfelt and inspiring transformation in the female protagonist was Gertrude Jennings' *The King's Man*. Performed by the writer's company at a number of suburban halls and theatres between October and December 1914, *The King's Man* focusses on Jessie, a young wife who, afraid that her husband will be 'hurt, and me not there - dying p'raps, and me not able to say goodbye to him' (13), will not let him go, even for 'a million Belgiums' (12).⁶¹ It is only when she is faced with the literal embodiment of those 'million Belgiums' in the figure of a refugee, played by the author, that Jessie's attitude is transformed. After hearing how the refugee is searching for her daughter, lost during the

Battle of Charleroi – a battle in which a tenth of the population of Dinant were killed, and in which women and children were deliberately shot – Jessie is asked, ‘Haven’t you any duty? Can’t you make this sacrifice?’ (20). She immediately responds ‘I shall be proud to do it - I won’t hold him back, I should be ashamed of him if he didn’t want to fight. I couldn’t tell her that my husband wouldn’t go’ (21).

In using the horrors experienced by Belgian refugees – and in particular women and children – during the invasion in this way, *The King’s Man* drew on a wider rhetoric of justification for the war, seen in recruiting posters and newspaper articles in the autumn and winter of 1914. It was not the only play to draw on atrocity stories to encourage recruitment. In *John Feeney, Socialist*, a one-act Scots play written by local woman, Dreda Boyd, for performance at a charity benefit at the Glasgow Pavilion in June 1915, and featuring a hardline socialist minder, the moment of transformation is similarly provided by an encounter with a traumatised Belgian refugee who tells of seeing babies and mothers being shot.⁶² In *England Expects* Eustace recounts witnessing the sacking of Louvain first-hand. ‘The beautiful old buildings, churches, little houses of the poor, all gone’ he tells the ‘nuts’:

- nothing but smoking ruins everywhere, running with blood - Men - old men and boys - lie butchered in the streets. Women - oh the women - [...] the horror, the unspeakable horror in her eyes. (I:7)

The best recruiting appeal to draw on invasion atrocities, however, at least according to Examiner of Plays, George Street, came from the soldier in *The Call* who describes experiencing ‘the Call!’ as:

‘owd Owd men an’ grannies, o’er there draggin’ their legs along t’roads an’ groanin’! Young childer whimp’rin’ an’ duckin’ when t’ German shells whistle o’er their ‘eads, young women, ay, girls, ruined, moanin’ o’er their shame, [...] It aw rises up, like a

great organ, callin'! 'Come, come'.⁶³

A number of plays drew on stories of German barbarity as part of their rhetorical strategy, yet Frederick Melville's *One Way of War*, which premiered at the Brixton Theatre on 9 October 1914 and was subtitled *What we are Fighting For*, was the first production to portray, rather than simply recount, atrocities. Set during the invasion, the play sees Jean, a boy who is keen to fight but too young to be a soldier, firing on a German advance party. The picture of German brutality is stark and climaxes with Jean being commanded, on pain of death, to shoot his brother, the *Cure* and his mother. Bearing a marked similarity to the story of Emile Despres – the 14-year old boy who was bayoneted after being ordered to shoot a French lieutenant on pain of death and instead shooting the German captain– Jean suffers the same fate and the play ends with him dying centre-stage, surrounded by allied soldiers who have arrived moments too late.⁶⁴ In his final lines – and the last lines of the play - the central message of the play is articulated: 'I wanted to be a soldier' Jean tells his mother 'but I'm too little – it's men we want to help us. They don't fight fair – won't anyone help us to beat these fellows. If I was a man I would fight them' (12). Directed, whether directly or indirectly, at eligible men in the audience, it is hard not to see this moment as a clear call to enlist. As such, whilst *One Way of War* was not explicit in its recruiting agenda, its dramatization of German brutality and its explicit articulation of the need for men, articulated through the voice of an Emile Despres proxy, functioned in much the same way as the visual propaganda of Louis Raemaekers and the accounts of William Le Quex. As the *Stage* reflected it was a play which 'might almost be used as a propagandist play in the cause of recruiting'.⁶⁵

One Way of War was the first play to depict enemy atrocities in a way which supported recruitment, yet it was not the last. Leonard Mortimer's *The Glorious Day*, a play which was reportedly 'responsible for many brave lads joining the colours', was another notable play which made effective use of staged atrocities to achieve its ends.⁶⁶ Premiering at

the Llanhilleth Playhouse, Wales, on 26 December 1914, only ten days after the bombing of Hartlepool, Scarborough and Whitby, it went on to be performed to full houses at urban theatres for almost a year.⁶⁷ In the wake of these attacks on the Home Front, the vivid tableau showing the bombardment and burning of Rheims cathedral, the dramatic enactment of the death of a British Tommy, and the shooting of an elderly priest by a German officer, were considered by at least one reviewer to be unsuitable ‘for stage representation when we have the horrible reality at our very door’.⁶⁸ It was precisely this, however, along with the local bands brought on to augment the orchestra and the appeal ‘made through song and speech’, that made the production all the more effective in encouraging enlistment.⁶⁹

Conclusion

Considering plays featuring atrocities in the context of recruiting is a salient reminder that there are a wider range of plays to be explored than has been possible here. Melodramas and even revues, frequently featured scenes of German brutality which drew on and reinforced popular perceptions of the enemy.⁷⁰ Whilst such plays may not have made explicit statements encouraging recruitment, their contribution to national mobilization – defined by John Horne as engagement in war efforts ‘both imaginatively, through collective representations, and the belief and value systems giving rise to these, and organizationally, through state and society’ – should not be overlooked.⁷¹ Rather than being distinct from recruiting plays, these plays evidence the ongoing efforts of theatre-makers to find new and more effective means through which to encourage audiences to support the war effort.

Up to the end of 1915 supporting the war effort largely meant encouraging enlistment. Yet with the passing of the Military Service Act, which brought conscription into force on 2 March 1916, theatre-makers began to focus their energies in new directions. Martin Harvey turned his War Lectures into fundraising events and playwrights began to explore how people

on the home front could 'do their bit' for the war effort. Yet this was not quite the end for recruiting plays. Writers continued to turn to the stage to address those men who were not subject to conscription. In February 1916, *A Little Prince*, featured an Irishman in Belgium desperate to enlist but prevented by his sweetheart; in December 1918, J. J. Mannix's 'Sinn Fein' episode, *A German Shell*, addressed the question of Irish involvement in the war; and in January 1916 Matthew Boulton's *Sword or Surplice, or A Man of Peace*, addressed the patriotic duty of clergy. Recruiting was also a theme in revues such as the June 1917 *You're For It*, and in comedy sketches such as *A Cushy Job* (January 1918) and *The Lancashire Rambler* (March 1918).

The ways in which these post-1916 plays approached the topic of enlistment, and whether they drew on the techniques and themes identified here, or developed them in distinctively new directions is a topic for another study. In examining such plays, we should be alert to the complex ways in which they respond to the context around them, as well as to how widely they were performed. As we have seen, recruiting plays were not always the didactic, crude and simplistic tools which they have long been considered. Whilst some, such as *Call to Arms* certainly fit this mould, others were sophisticated and nuanced in both form and content: playfully exploring the relationship between fiction and reality, spectator and performer, and providing spaces in which the fears around enlisting could be articulated and explored, even if they were largely then contained.

This essay is a reminder of the potential to be gained by re-situating theatre and performance within the wider context of Great War recruitment and mobilization. As communal social spaces, theatres were part of a network of cultural and social experiences which together mobilised the nation behind the war. More directly, in the recruiting plays and extra-dramatic moments of the first eighteen-months of the conflict, they made a practical and long-overlooked contribution to the raising of the New Army.

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Notes

¹ For discussion of the production see Wood, “The Play all London is Discussing”.

² Kosok, *Theatre of War*, 162.

³ Williams, *British Theatre in the Great War*, 11.

⁴ Great War Theatre, <https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk>.

⁵ See for example, Cochrane and Robinson, *Theatre History and Historiography*, and Hughes, “The new armies”.

⁶ Nicholson, “This Unhappy Nation”, 48.

⁷ The Lord Chamberlain was the official responsible for licensing drama in England, Scotland and Wales until 1968. All plays had to be licensed for performance and the records of these licenses are held at the British Library. Wartime records are searchable online at www.greatwartheatre.org.uk.

⁸ *Manchester Evening News*, August, 10 1914

⁹ *Manchester Evening News*, August, 8 1914

¹⁰ *Bath Chronicle*, August 22, 1914

¹¹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, August, 11 1914

¹² *Hull Daily Mail*, July 3, 1914. The tour began at Eastbourne on 13 July, 1914.

¹³ For reports see *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, July 27, 1914; *Middlesborough Gazette*, August 26, 1914

¹⁴ Martin-Harvey, *Autobiography*, 448, 449.

¹⁵ Martin-Harvey, *Autobiography*, 448.

¹⁶ *The People*, June 20, 1915, my emphasis.

¹⁷ *Manchester Courier*, September 26, 1914.

¹⁸ See reports in *Birmingham Daily Gazette* and *Birmingham Mail*, August 13, 1914. On 20 August the *Birmingham Mail* reported that the eighteenth appeal was at Smethwick Theatre, Birmingham on 19 August.

¹⁹ *Thanet Advertiser*, August 15, 1914; At the King's Theatre that week audiences could see Arthur J. Hill's marionette show, as well as a selection of films; at the Royal Palace audiences could see a translation of Henri Bernstein's pre-war drama *The Attack*, and from Thursday Jocelyn Brandon and Frederick Arthur's farce *The Chaperone*; and at the Royal Victoria Pavilion, they could see a revue produced by Joe Collins and entitled *Can You Beat This?*. Whilst the films included recent war footage, none of the live performance was war-themed.

²⁰ *West Sussex Gazette*, August 27, 1914.

²¹ *Portsmouth Evening News*, August 21, 1914.

²² Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 75.

²³ *Leeds Mercury*, September 22, 1914.

²⁴ *Shields Daily News*, September 16, 1914; *Manchester Courier*, October 30, 1915.

²⁵ For a list of performances see Great War Theatre,
<https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk/db/script/26/>.

²⁶ *Leeds Mercury*, 22 September 1914.

²⁷ Moon, Howard. "The Invasion of the United Kingdom: Public Controversy and Official Planning". PhD Thesis. U of London, 1968. Cited in Wood "The Play all London is Discussing", 194.

²⁸ *Jarrow Express*, November 20, 1914.

²⁹ *Stage*, Thursday May 27, 1915.

³⁰ *The Stage*, December 3, 1914. It was licensed for performance at the Hippodrome, Golders Green, London on 7 September, but there is no evidence that this performance took place. For a list of performances see <https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk/db/script/24/>.

³¹ Coetzee 'English Nationalism', 366.

³² *Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald*, September 26, 1914.

³³ *Era*, 23 September 23, 1914.

³⁴ *Daily Record*, November 26, 1914. It is only briefly referenced by Nicholson (48) and Williams (182).

³⁵ Davis, *Call to Arms*, 7.

³⁶ *Daily Record*, November, 24 1914; *Western Daily Press*, December 9, 1914.

³⁷ See, for example, the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee poster 'England Expects Every Man To Do His Duty' produced in November 1914.

<https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/894158>; *England Expects*, directed by George Loane Tucker. London Film Service, October 1914.

³⁸ The balcony cost 6d, the grand circle no more than 1d; the stalls 2s and seats in boxes 2s, 6d, see *Globe*, September 17, 1914; in contrast 'special matinee prices' at the London Hippodrome in December the same year cost: Boxes, 10s 6d and £1 1s; Orchestra Stalls, 5s, Grand Circle, 5s and 3s; Stalls, 2s 6d and the Circle, 2s. Standing places were 2s. The cheapest unreserved seats were 1s for the Amphitheatre Stalls. See Victoria and Albert Museum. Hippodrome, London 1914-1918. VAM, THM/LON//HIPPP.

³⁹ *Sporting Times*, September 12, 1914.

⁴⁰ *Sporting Times*, September 26, 1914.

⁴¹ *Stage*, September 24, 1914.

⁴² *Stage*, September 10, 1914.

⁴³ *Stage*, September 24, 1914; The songs included 'God Save The King', 'La Marseillaise', 'La Brabanconne', and the Russian hymn. These scenes were likely taken from *The British Army Film*, which was shot in 1913 and released in January 1914. For more information see *The British Army Film*.

⁴⁴ *Stage*, September 10, 1914.

⁴⁵ McGann, *Beauty of Inflections*, 191.

⁴⁶ *Stage*, September 24, 1914.

⁴⁷ *Tatler*, September 30, 1914.

⁴⁸ *Ealing Gazette*, September 19, 1914; *Era*, September 16, 1914.

⁴⁹ *Newcastle Journal*, September 21, 1914.

⁵⁰ *Manchester Courier*, September 18, 1914; *Globe*, September 18, 1914.

⁵¹ Knoblock, *Round the Room*, 203.

⁵² *Sporting Times*, September 26, 1914.

⁵³ Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, 55.

⁵⁴ Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, 55.

⁵⁵ *Tatler*, September 30, 1914.

⁵⁶ For more information see <https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk/db/script/409/>. In contrast, the soldier warns that for man who fails to enlist 'Men'll 'ush when they see thee comin! Tha'll get cowl looks. They'll whisper 'E were deaf. 'E never 'eard the call!.' (14).

⁵⁷ Hynes, *A War Imagined*.

⁵⁸ See <https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk/db/script/469/>.

⁵⁹ Macdonald, "Gender, Disability, Wartime", 63.

⁶⁰ Binyon, *To Women*, 3-4.

⁶¹ For a list of performances see <https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk/db/script/47/>.

⁶² For more information see <https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk/db/script/452/>.

⁶³ Street, Licensing Comments on *The Call*, LCP1915/13

<https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk/db/script/409/>; *The Call*, 14.

⁶⁴ For an account of the story of Despres see *Northern Whig*, September 18, 1914.

⁶⁵ *Stage*, November 12, 1914

⁶⁶ *Coventry Herald*, April 2, 1915.

⁶⁷ The tour of *The Glorious Day* ended the week of November 29, 1915. For a list of

performances see <https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk/db/script/948/>. In August 1915 a new version of *The Glorious Day*, containing additional clowning and musical humour, was submitted for license, although it does not appear to have been widely performed under this title. See <https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk/db/script/605/>.

⁶⁸ *Coventry Herald* April 2, 1915.

⁶⁹ *Gloucester Journal*, April 10, 1915.

⁷⁰ There are numerous examples including Arthur Wimperis and Hartley Carrick's revue *By Jingo If We Do*, first performed at the Empire Theatre, London on 19 November 1914. For more information see <https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk/db/script/79/>. Also Henderson's *The Bully of Berlin*, first performed at the Dudley Opera House on 23 November 1914. See <https://www.greatwartheatre.org.uk/db/script/125/>.

⁷¹ Horne, "Mobilising for Total War", 1.