

WE GOT MITTENS TOO!

Independent Evaluation report, 12th January 2009

1. Introduction

We Got Mittens Too! was a site-specific theatre production, performed in the adjoining premises of the Literary & Philosophical Society (the Lit & Phil), the North of England Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineers (the Mining Institute), and the Provincial Grand Lodge of Northumberland (Neville Hall), in Newcastle, in November 2008.

Based on an original idea and text by the Lit & Phil's Librarian, Kay Easson, using material from the library's collections, *We Got Mittens Too!* described life in the First World War for those in and behind the front line and for the civilian population living and working back home in Newcastle. The performance was repeated 18 times over two weeks, in November, coinciding with the 90th anniversary of the end of the war.

This was the second collaboration between the Lit & Phil, the Mining Institute and the professional theatre company, European Players. (The first was the award-winning *Novocastrian Philosophers' Club*, in 2007).

European Players specialises in promenade productions that respond to a particular site. The creative team typically draws heavily on local knowledge, stories and resources and combines the skills of professional and non-professional performers with those of professional artists, theatre makers and technicians.

The company for *We Got Mittens Too!* comprised:

- a professional creative producer
- a librarian, researcher and writer
- 9 professional performers (4 actors and 5 musicians)
- 9 professional theatre makers, designers, artists, and technical crew
- 31 non-professional performers (2 paid apprentices, 8 members of the Northern Stage Performance Group; 4 performing arts students and 1 stage management student from Newcastle College; 14 cadets and 2 officers from three detachments of the Northumbria Army Cadet Force)
- members of Age Concern, who knitted 80 pairs of mittens for use in the performance.

The company was supported by staff and/or volunteers from the Lit & Phil, the Mining Institute, the Provincial Grand Lodge of Northumberland, Northern Stage, Northumbria Army Cadet Force, Newcastle College and Northumbria University. The production received financial support from Arts Council England, North East (for research and development), Newcastle City Council,

Northern Rock Foundation, One North East (as part of Culture¹⁰'s JUICE Festival for young people), the Sir James Knott Trust and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The sources for this report include observation of the performance, analysis of feedback cards completed by audience members (on site, immediately after the performance, or taken away and subsequently returned); emails sent by audience members to an address set up for that purpose (gotmittens@yahoo.co.uk); discussions with two groups of cast members from the Northern Stage Performance Group and Newcastle College; with members of the Northumbria Army Cadet Force; with A level students at Whitley Bay High School and their teacher; and individual feedback from writer and Librarian Kay Easson, education officer for the Lit & Phil and the Mining Institute, Sophie Robinson, and the creative producer Cinzia Hardy.

2. Findings

The brief for the evaluation was to report on the impact of the project on the host organisations (the Lit & Phil and the Mining Institute) on the participants (the company) and the audience, and the findings are organised under these three headings. While individually distinct, the responses and perspectives in one section often echo and enhance those in another and it is important to read all three sections to gain the full picture.

2.1. The impact of the project on the Lit & Phil and the Mining Institute

The Lit & Phil and the Mining Institute first worked together on a creative project with an independent producer (European Players) in 2007. One of the aims of that project was to strengthen the relationship between the two organisations. A second was to increase public awareness of the buildings the organisations occupy and of the services and facilities they provide. A third aim was to test the capacity of the two organisations to diversify their programmes, with a view to demonstrating their public value and appeal, not only to members of the public but also to potential funders. This second collaboration between the Lit & Phil, the Mining Institute and European Players, *We Got Mittens Too!*, was intended to further all of these aims, but also to honour the memory of local soldiers and civilians who lived and, in some cases, died during the First World War.

The Novocastrian Philosophers' Club demonstrated the possibility and the popularity of a promenade production in which members of the public walked from scene to scene, around and between the Lit & Phil and Neville Hall. The proposal for a second production, using similar methods, was easier for the staff and trustees of the two organisations to visualise second time round. It is likely that the role of Kay Easson (the Lit & Phil's chief officer) as the originator of the project reassured the trustees and staff that this would be a

manageable and well-managed project and it may have increased the Lit & Phil's sense of being an equal creative partner with European Players. Kay Easson continued to work full-time as Librarian, while also collaborating with the creative team on *We Got Mittens Too!*

The theme and content of the production, its references to the history of the Lit & Phil and to real and fictional individuals who worked and studied there, as well as the way the library's collections were used, all added to the interest for staff, trustees and members. Some staff had worked with some of the same company members (from European Players and the Northern Stage Performance Group) in 2007 and the positive experience on that occasion seems to have made it easier for them to accommodate this second project and the inevitable disruptions and adjustments that went with it.

The health and safety risks presented by a production of this kind (with the audience moving around the building, the use of special effects in confined spaces and the quick changes of set) were assessed and managed by an experienced production team, allaying any concerns that staff or trustees may have had about the safety of the building and the public.

The Mining Institute was less involved this year than last, because less of its space was needed, but the education officer (jointly employed by the Mining Institute and the Lit & Phil) played a key role in raising schools' awareness of the production and associated lectures, promoting a special performance for secondary schools on 11th November and in organising a signed performance for users of British Sign Language. The Freemasons, who occupy part of Neville Hall, were particularly generous in allowing the company and the audience to use their space.

The availability of Bolbec Hall was critical to the staging of *We Got Mittens Too!* It housed a production office, making space, storage space, dressing rooms, a green room and rehearsal space. The production was a major logistical undertaking and could not have been executed to the same scale or standard without the facilities of Bolbec Hall.

It is important to note that, as in 2007, some members of the Lit & Phil objected to the use of the library for live performance and to the reduced access to some parts of the building during the production period, but this was a minority view. The audience feedback (reported below) highlights the public's fascination with this pair of buildings and the extent to which they value them. Many audience members were visiting for the first time, or for the first time in decades and were excited by what they found. Members of the Lit & Phil and of the Mining Institute commented on the sensitivity with which the buildings (as well as the subject matter) had been handled. They were intrigued to see the buildings used in this way and happy that their organisations were involved in this kind of creative collaboration.

We Got Mittens Too! attracted people of different generations and backgrounds to the Lit & Phil and provided them with a memorable experience which, in some cases, will bring them back for other events and possibly as members. The local media coverage (previews and reviews) was positive and drew attention to the involvement of the wider community (e.g. the cadets, Age Concern and Newcastle College). See Appendix 2 for sample reviews.

Perhaps most significant for the future of the Lit & Phil and the Mining Institute were the number of young people touched by this production, either as part of the company, or as audience members or, as in the case of Northumbria University's fashion students, observers who were able to use the production for associated project work. Aspects of the First World War are studied at GCSE and A Level, in both English and History. *We Got Mittens Too!* effectively introduced a new audience of young people to some of the less familiar dimensions of the war, as it was experienced at home in the North East as well as in the field. It showed them how, through a combination of careful research and creativity, contemporary students can make tangible connections between the past and the present, the global and the local. The post of education officer provides the Lit & Phil with an unprecedented opportunity to develop relationships with young people, for their own benefit and for the long-term benefit of the two organisations.

2.2. The impact of the project on the company (the participants)

The genesis of *We Got Mittens Too!* was Kay Easson's text, but the final version experienced by the company and the audience was the result of months of research, discussion and experimentation. This process demanded a considerable degree of trust on the part of every member of the company, professionals and non-professionals, performers, designers and technicians alike.

Working with Kay Easson, the co-directors, Maurice O'Connell and Alison Andrews, would take a character, a scene or a storyline from the original script and develop it in rehearsal with members of the cast. Every non-professional member of the cast had passed an audition, though not necessarily for a specific role. They improvised and rehearsed moments and whole scenes without always knowing how these might fit into the bigger picture.

In August 2008 a research trip by the creative team, to Flanders, prompted some new ideas, as a result of which the production did not achieve its final form until half way through the first week of public performances. For some members of the cast, and particularly those who were used to more traditional methods of rehearsal and performance, this was slightly unnerving, but two members of the Northern Stage Performance Group who had taken part in *The Novocastrian Philosophers' Club* were able to reassure

their colleagues that 'it would be alright on the night'. After the event, the cast was unanimous in the view that the approach to making the production had produced levels of trust and adventurousness in the company that far outweighed any nervousness.

The non-professional company members thought that their ideas and opinions had been given as much weight as those of the professionals and that their willingness to commit time and effort to the production had been acknowledged. The decision to audition cast members meant that some members of the Northern Stage Performance Group who had taken part in *The Novocastrian Philosophers' Club* were not offered roles this time. While this caused some initial discomfort to those who were selected (and to those who were not) it was recognised by most that this story was specific to a certain period and style and could not accommodate everyone.

For the performing arts students and the stage management student from Newcastle College, *We Got Mittens Too!* was a valuable opportunity to work with a mixed company of professionals and non-professionals of different ages and levels of experience, and to perform with an audience at close quarters. No differentiation was made between the professionals and non-professionals in their responsibility for maintaining the pace and credibility of the story.

Improvisation was integral to some of the scenes and this required cast members to pick up, and respond convincingly to, the varied reactions of individual audience members. In the field hospital scene, for example, reactions ranged from total immersion in the role of a contemporary visitor, to wordless standing and staring, to awkward laughter. Some audience members tried to avoid interacting with the actors, altogether, by listening to the recordings embedded in the pillows, reading the letters on the beds or concentrating intently on the singer. Others talked easily with the nurse about the lack of equipment. The challenges for the cast in this scene were considerable.

For the young cadets, participating in *We Got Mittens Too!* was unlike anything they had experienced before, either individually or as a group. Their officers reported increased levels of confidence on the part of some cadets and extraordinary demonstrations of commitment in turning out night after night and in some cases twice a day, while also attending school or college, and parades and church services during the Armistice Day week. Two of the cadets used their involvement in the project to earn credits towards their Duke of Edinburgh Award, under the community service option.

Like the audience (see below) different company members saw different parts of the show and consequently experienced and described it in different ways. There were some scenes that were never seen by some players, because they were occupied elsewhere in the building, starting or finishing another part of the performance. Unlike a traditionally staged production,

even where the whole cast witnessed a scene, they did so from very different positions (for example, the selection and parcelling of books, was seen by some from the floor of the library and by others from the balcony). Cast members contributing to this evaluation clearly valued their participation in the project. For younger members, in particular, it introduced a new way of working that is likely to inform their future work and their response to the work of others. For some of the older members, it reinforced their sense of local identity, their knowledge of local history and their evident affection for the Lit & Phil as an organisation and as a building.

2.3. The impact of the project on the audience

The promenade nature of *We Got Mittens Too!* meant that every member of the audience, at every performance, had a different experience and came away with different stories and images, yet the overwhelming response was a positive one. This is evident in the number and quality of written comments received.

At the end of every performance, the audience had to exit on to the street and then re-enter Neville Hall to pick up their coats. As they did so, they were offered the opportunity to complete (or take away) a feedback form. At least 138 people took the time to complete forms on site or returned them later and a further 17 sent comments by email. Hardly anyone wrote fewer than two sentences and many wrote much more. Young people attending two performances exclusively for schools on 11th November were asked to complete forms provided by the Juice Festival. These responses were fewer in number and briefer.

All but a few of the written responses are attached at Appendix 1. Those that were very short or repeated what had already been said by others (e.g. "Excellent. Very moving.") have not been transcribed. A few have been edited for length and in all but one case, personal messages to company members have been removed.

Respondents were guided to address certain questions. These included their previous relationship with the Lit & Phil, their response to the use the company made of the space and their interest in seeing more of this kind of work. This partly explains the repeated references to the buildings and their enthusiasm for 'more of the same'. The following quotes give an indication of the responses, but Appendix 1 is worth reading in full.

Discovering and rediscovering the Lit & Phil

"Great use of a very unique space. I'd not been to the Lit & Phil – what an amazing building and very creative use of the space."

"I have visited the Lit & Phil once before, but I'm not a member. It is a wonderful building and you do seem to be doing a good job of raising awareness and encouraging the public to attend / visit."

"Would certainly be interested in more of this and many years since been in Lit & Phil and had forgotten how interesting it was – might join them."

"Loved building – haven't been in Lit & Phil since the 60s."

"I am a member of Lit and Phil and it was interesting to see the building in a new and intimate way and the use of archive material enhanced the experience considerably."

Local relevance

Audience members appreciated the use of simple and authentic local sources.

"The writing always preserved an authentic tone by letting contemporary documentation speak for itself, but the sequencing of the different episodes within the framework of Ruth Dodds' diary required invention and skill. And the use of different spaces and perspectives in the building was both effective and beautifully orchestrated."

"Giving the audience documents which heightened the illusion of past time was unexpected."

"Perhaps the greatest surprise is the pleasure of finding that such relatively modest material is so engaging and affecting when this intimate formula is used."

Well over half of the respondents commented on the way the performance had informed them or reminded them of aspects of the First World War and a smaller number reflected on the impact of the War on local people. There were several references to the role of the cadets in the production, the quality of their performance and the link their presence made between the past and the present. Many respondents commented on the success with which the company had achieved a sensitive balance of respect, humour and seriousness.

"Everything about the performance was terrific. The writing was engaging, thoughtful, fun and sad. The music was appropriate and added to the atmosphere. The acting, staging and positioning of the audience worked very well. Props were great and of course the building is fantastic. Well done. It was a great night. Would like to see more."

Appealing to different generations

A number of adults brought children or teenagers with them and it is clear that this was a performance that successfully communicated to different age groups.

"My son, Ricky (13) and I attended the production somewhat in ignorance. Despite being indigenous natives I'm sorry to say we had never been to the

Lit and Phil previously, or indeed attended this type of walk-through performance. A delight therefore to be able to tour the site as well as being entertained and educated all in one afternoon when I would otherwise have wasted the day watching football!"

"...I was hugely rewarded in that my grand-daughters really engaged with the event and said they had enjoyed the whole experience. They have even asked if I will bring them back 'when it is a library'" so they can see and hear what is on offer."

A level English students at Whitley Bay High School talked about how the production had added different dimensions to their understanding of the war and of the images they had of it – summed up by one as 'not much more than muddy trenches and poetry'. They were struck by the youth of the cadets and by their realisation that many of the soldiers from the North East who took part would not have been old enough to study for 'A' levels. Twelve of the thirteen students interviewed were adamant that the production had given them new insights and had added to their interest in studying literature of the period.

Artistic quality

The audience made consistently positive comments about the artistic vision, the quality of the design, the acting and the musicianship. There were many references, too, to the different media and performance styles used – acting, dance and movement, live music, reading, film, textiles, installations, models, smells, lighting, improvisation, the use of the audience as extras, and so on. The production included designs and installations by two of the North East's nationally recognised designers and artists, Imogen Cloet and Julia Barton and their contribution to the audience's appreciation of the production was very evident.

The two most frequently expressed responses were emotion and surprise. The surprise related both to the sight and use made of familiar and unfamiliar spaces, and to complex, multi-layered presentation of the story.

"Quite brilliant. Not only the quality of the acting but the use of the building. Fantastic details and pacing of the audience through the building and phases of horror and fun. Very well done."

"All the performances - from actors, musicians and not forgetting the cadets - were committed and convincing, and the complicated details of the production were very impressive."

Many audience members said they would like to have seen it again, to catch what they had missed first time round. Emotion was expressed in relation to the theme of the story, to individual performances and to specific sights and scenes, notably the field hospital and, at different times throughout the performance, the 'bloodied, bandaged books'. The final scenes in which the

names of the dead are read aloud, as the audience weaves out of the room, stepping over the books, and the dropping of poppy petals into the stairwell were also cited as highly emotional moments. The quality of the production and their reaction to it took some people by surprise.

"I was prepared to hate it all, having a total aversion to audience participation in any shape or form. The whole concept and production were exceptional, engaging, informative and touching at the most visceral level."

3. Conclusions

Some clear conclusions can be drawn from the evaluation. *We Got Mittens Too!* was a positive experience for a sizeable majority of those involved, including most of those audience members who provided written responses after the performances.

The project resulted in tangible gains for the Lit & Phil and the Mining Institute, for those directly involved in making and performing the show, and for members of the audience. For all three groups of people, it generated or enhanced ideas, skills, experiences and, in some cases, working relationships that now have the potential to be taken further, on an individual or organisational level. For example, the Lit & Phil has stronger relationships with students and teachers at certain secondary schools and at Newcastle College than it had before. Students who came to see the production and attended associated lectures are now likely to see the Lit & Phil as a useful resource. The younger actors and stage managers may be more likely to seek out opportunities to stretch their imagination and skills, and audiences may be more likely to buy tickets to other out-of-the-ordinary arts events. The engagement of different generations in the production and in the audience was a particularly positive achievement.

The fact that *We Got Mittens Too!* was rooted in the social history and architecture of the Lit & Phil and the Mining Institute was valued not only by those most closely associated with these organisations, but also by company members, audiences and the media who reviewed the show. By dramatising the role of the two organisations in the city, almost a century ago, the production seems likely to have increased interest in what their contemporary relevance to the city is, and could be.

The audience feedback confirmed the demand for this kind of site-specific, promenade theatre performance. In the audience's view, the combination of different art forms and the skill with which they were presented contributed greatly to the experience. European Players' decision to work with musicians, live, for the first time and to commission two highly experienced artists/designers to collaborate with them produced some of the production's most memorable moments.

The successful delivery of projects of this complexity and scale will continue to rely on a significant amount of donated time and resources, in combination with earned and contributed income. While the professional members of the company were paid, they put in considerably more time than they were paid for and all other members of the company (from the Northern Stage Performance Group, Newcastle College and the Northumbria Army Cadet Force) volunteered their time. The fundraising targets were met but some decisions were received later than anticipated. While acknowledging that fundraising cannot begin until the project for which funding is needed can be accurately described, the conclusion has to be that fundraising activity needs to start sooner. The main sources of funding for site-specific work with small audience numbers are likely to continue to be public and charitable bodies. Opportunities for commercial sponsorship are limited because, while the profile of the production may be high, the number of people who will see it (and the sponsor's credits) is small.

It is partly because of the small number of people who have seen *The Novocastrian Philosophers' Club* and *We Got Mittens Too!* that the Lit & Phil and the Mining Institute, together, are beginning to establish a reputation as one of the city's most intriguing cultural venues.

Appendix 1

Audience feedback by email

We thought we would like to contribute some feedback after we saw this show on Wednesday 5th November. We loved the production and found it to be very moving indeed. We know and love both buildings very much - we are not members, but we attend as many lectures and functions there as possible, and my husband is a volunteer at the Mining Institute. The production was extremely clever and made full use of the surroundings. We also enjoyed the Novocastrian Philosophers' evening, and think the productions very innovative and effective. We would certainly come again - more please. Best wishes and congratulations.

Better than last event.

'Mittens'. Great. So authentic (even if I did not get a sherry!). The actors were so into it.

Enjoyed last event, but this was really special, especially as it is 90 years since it took place, also the atmosphere of the place is unique.

I attended the show on Thursday night and greatly enjoyed it. It was a very moving experience - well-written, well-performed, and extremely effective in so many ways. I thought the use of books to represent the fallen was particularly apt. Thank you for a truly memorable evening.

Brilliant!! Field hospital scene very moving. Thank you.

We attended the performance on 5/11 and though thoroughly enjoying the performance we found it very moving and thought provoking. The scenes in the bunkers and the field hospital were particularly moving.

We liked the promenade setting, giving us access to the splendid buildings and the actors were excellent. The only criticism would be the "Curtain Call" where we the audience were unsure that that was what it was, or part of the performance. So, on that night, I didn't feel we did the company justice - sorry.

P.S. It was particularly poignant to follow this performance with "Geoff's Dead - Disco For Sale" at the Live the following Saturday.

My wife and I had never been to The Lit & Phil or Mining Institute before. We would emphatically come again.

A hugely impressive production in every single unique aspect, in an awe-inspiring venue, performed by an extremely competent cast, and led by a superior production team.

It was a real privilege to have had the opportunity to experience this 'journey'. I was variously amused, entertained, saddened, excited, educated, and more than once felt an integral part of proceedings (stamping the Soldier's Record Card a good vehicle here). The multi-layered stimuli worked very effectively, scents, lighting, transitions from one theatre to another, the unique adaptations of the building.

This was, to me, a most meaningful tribute. The specific references to Tyneside made it all the more real.

We were very impressed with this work and would welcome the opportunity to see more.

A most thought-provoking performance.

The waste of life in two world wars and through to the modern times of Tony Blair committing troops to battle without proper equipment is a subject I find particularly offensive and disturbing. The show treated the subject matter sensitively and with the gravitas the subject matter demanded, yet still managed to inject some humour to lighten the proceedings at times.

The "trenches and dugouts" worked well but the Field Hospital scene was the most dramatic and powerful. I thought "Dark is the Sun" was a hauntingly beautiful song and I hope I am not being a proud dad when I say Melanie delivered this song with resonance and real feeling. Beautiful.

I also admired the way the café scene filtered back to the pathos of the song again at the close.

Congratulations to all involved.

It was stunning.

Wow factors!

The efficient cloakroom run painstakingly by Kay in her Mittens Crew T shirt. The entry of the cast from the doorway of the Mining Institute with the dropped papers.

The young army cadets who were so perfectly behaved.

The briefing about how we ended up with a war.

The lecture about the lice - fascinating
The advertising slots for Fenwicks (very like *Land & Sea* adverts for Aquascutum and Burberry.)
All Ruth Dodds' speeches.
The Munitionettes.
The descent to the trenches with all those sandbags.
The film.
The gas attack.
The field hospital with the marvellous recording and archive letters with those terrific costumes for the nurses.
The wine in odd glasses and Music Hall with those fab, home-knitted mittens.
How did you do the changeover so efficiently?
The descent from the Lit & Phil with the poppies.
The stamping of the trench map and the certificate.
The publicity, the official actors, the unofficial actors, the costumes, the teamwork, the music...
Yes, it was ALL wonderful.
Now, will there be a DVD for us to buy of selected clips extracts? If there isn't one planned, would you like me to try to record an unofficial one for you?
You must have a record of this.
THANK YOU FOR A MOST MOVING AND PROFESSIONAL EVENT. More please!

I attended the performance on Saturday afternoon, 8th November with my two grand-daughters, aged 10 and 12 years. We all thoroughly enjoyed the performance which was a finely balanced production of solemnity and frivolousness. The serious issues were presented in a moving manner whereas the lighthearted periods had the "slightly over the top" feel to them, which quite rightly brought home the contrasting emotions which were always close to the surface.

The acting, music and direction were all most impressive and I was hugely rewarded in that my grand-daughters really engaged with the event and said they had enjoyed the whole experience. They have even asked if I will bring them back "when it is a library" so they can see and hear what is on offer.

Thanks again, to all concerned. It was a remarkable experience to share on the weekend of remembrance.

I came to the performance on Sunday 9th November. Thank you. The balance struck between the sadness, the horror, the cheerfulness under pain and the comprehensive, utter pointlessness of war was superbly and sensitively achieved. I was moved on a number of occasions but two things stand out - the beds of flowers and the blood-soaked bandaged books. All the company deserve congratulations - the cadets should be pleased with their excellent contribution. Unfortunately I will away in November and would have

loved to have contributed to an informal discussion. Should it be delayed to mid December please keep me in mind. Once again, thank you. Keep up this sort of work.

Another amazing performance. Such imagination and talent. You could have sold tickets for double the number of nights - I brought 3 guests (and wanted more, but you were sold out) and as soon as the night started, each guest wanted tickets for friends and relations!

Not only was it extraordinary theatre making such use of the buildings - but very moving. A fitting tribute to the anniversary.

We'd all 4 come again. Yes we'd like to see much more of this kind of work. (I'm a Mining Inst. Council member - attended Novocastrians too).

Most surprising? The way you managed to change the audience's mood from sombre to concert party to stony sombre again.

A brilliantly inventive performance. Entering the field hospital gave me a real shock. Touches such as the wounded books on the stretchers, and the poppy beds in the hospital, so effective at making one think at a different level. The use of humour to relieve the reality - the louse lecture was hilarious. Thought the opening was a bit slow, and the concert party at the end struck rather a false note. But a thoroughly enjoyable - if that is the right word - experience. Yes, more please.

I was fortunate to attend the performance of *We got mittens too!* on 12th November. I thought the content of the play excellent and the players enthusiastic and convincing in their roles.

I am a member of Lit and Phil and it was interesting to see the building in a new and intimate way and the use of archive material enhanced the experience considerably. The evening certainly brought home very effectively just what the war meant to families locally. Well done to all concerned.

I saw your production a week ago, and greatly enjoyed its originality. The writing always preserved an authentic tone by letting contemporary documentation speak for itself, but the sequencing of the different episodes within the framework of Ruth Dodds' diary required invention and skill. And the use of different spaces and perspectives in the building was both effective and beautifully orchestrated.

All the performances - from actors, musicians and not forgetting the cadets - were committed and convincing, and the complicated details of the production were very impressive.

In answer to your questions, I'm a member of the Lit & Phil so I know the building from a different perspective. Having carelessly missed *The Novocastrian Philosophers'*, I saw *A Light in Westgate Street* in September, and yes I would come again. You ask what the most surprising thing was. I already knew that there would be mingling of players with the audience, and that we would be moving round the building. So some techniques weren't an actual surprise, although they are crucial to your formula. Giving the audience documents which heightened the illusion of past time was unexpected. Perhaps the greatest surprise is the pleasure of finding that such relatively modest material is so engaging and affecting when this intimate formula is used.

I brought a non-member friend who was equally impressed, and we both thought many compliments were due to all responsible.

Thank you all for the *Got Mittens* production... My son, Ricky (13) and I attended the production somewhat in ignorance. Despite being indigenous natives I'm sorry to say we had never been to the Lit and Phil previously, or indeed attended this type of walk-through performance. A delight therefore to be able to tour the site as well as being entertained and educated all in one afternoon when I would otherwise have wasted the day watching football!

Although a little confused as to whether we were following actual characters who initially worked at the library and had joined the war effort, we were engrossed in the performance and found it very thought provoking. The shell hole and bunker scenes were particularly atmospheric and the hospital piece almost voyeuristic. The initial factual piece about the formation of the German state and its paranoia regarding a lack of empire status I found particularly interesting and enlightening although the details regarding lice infestation were bordering on being too graphic! This has added to our depth of theatrical and cultural experience and we will certainly look out for similar pieces in the future. Thanks again

Just a rather late note to say how much I enjoyed the production. It is a great shame that it was not possible for more people to have seen the play. In particular and as a doctor I was very moved by the field hospital scene. The grass and poppies on beds was very poignant.

It was an amazing and poignant experience, vivid in recalling a wide spectrum of life during the war. The actors involved the spectators and lived their roles. There were such humorous touches, even in the midst of

tragedy. I am so glad to have seen the "play" and congratulate all who devised it / participated in it.

Responses from 116 individuals who completed feedback forms after the performance

A very innovative performance that struck all the right tones and was a great experience like nothing I've seen before.

Very, very impressive! It really takes you back in time. Unforgettable.

A very moving performance. Excellent music – fits very well.

Very informative and helpful.

Superb. A perfect tribute to the time. Stunning attention to detail.

Very good, interesting and challenging performance.

Incredibly well structured as a piece of theatre.

Very visually provoking/engaging.

Often sinister – e.g. the hospital scene. The graves as beds.

Moving and sad.

I was prepared to hate it all, having a total aversion to audience participation in any shape or form. The whole concept and production were exceptional, engaging, informative and touching at the most visceral level. I am wearing my mother's locket, which contains a photograph of her sister, Cassie, who died of Spanish flu aged 18 and never married.

Well worth the trip from Glasgow. Helped bring history to life and showing the shocking effects of war.

Wonderful event – very moving, funny in places; great use of a wonderful space. The hospital room was incredibly emotional. Thanks.

A most marvellous performance. Can't put into words but thank you so much.

What a wonderful production in an amazing two buildings. Very moving – especially the field hospital room. The music fitted perfectly and I liked all the little touches, e.g. poppy seed packets, the 'wine' to make us even more involved. Would certainly be interested in more of this and many years since been in Lit & Phil and had forgotten how interesting it was – might join them.

Extremely moving. Appreciated all the work in preparation and the smoothness of transitions. Cast exuberant and made excellent contact and

interaction. Loved building – haven't been in Lit & Phil since the 60s. Would have liked longer in hospital ward. Music added to wonderful atmosphere. An exceptional performance.

A great location and fantastic attention to detail. It was great to see young soldiers taking part too. A successful collaboration. I liked the unity of the vision of the piece and the changing moods and atmosphere. The hospital ward was so poignant, we needed the concert party to lift our spirits.

Thoroughly enjoyed this production – very creative and able to provoke a moving response in its portrayal of events with which we're familiar. I thought the area with the beds/hospital location especially moving and enjoyed the combination of letters, spoken words and images.

I was not fortunate to get a ticket to *Novocastrians* so did not know what to expect and *We Got Mittens* was amazing and extremely moving experience. It felt as if you were seeing ghosts of past emerging from the walls or the Lit & Phil and the audience was projected to the horror of the Great War in this 90th year. This is a commemoration I will remember for a long time. Many, many thanks.

An amazing, unusual experience. I would definitely like to see more productions of this sort. It was at times enjoyable, but also moving. Brilliant. The music added greatly to the overall effect. It was very appropriate. Well done!

I can say I didn't know what to expect, but the acting and whole ambience of the production was fabulous. It gives you an insight to what the soldiers had to put up with. I'm very pleased I came to see it. I would definitely come back again.

Very enjoyable and professional performance. Brought the experience to life. Music was excellent and fitted very well.

A thoughtfully presented and moving performance. The unique setting of the Mining Institute and Lit & Phil was used to great effect. I am not a member of either institution. I was surprised by the flowers on the beds.

Very moving performance and interesting use of sources to bring events to life. Could have been more about Lit & Phil's response to war. I'd have been interested to know more about that.

What is always amazing is watching the reactions of others, as well as understanding my own emotions and emotional journey. Well done to all.

Atmospheric, detailed, very close feel of time. Entertaining and most enjoyable. Liked format. Quite an achievement. NB (1) More idea of what to do in hospital. (2) Reference to postcard – "ticked well" – probably not clear

to most people. (Perhaps elaborate on lack of information sent back more obviously, by personal comment of cast member.)

Very moving. Excellent. Good use of space. Good performers. Excellent respect for brave men. Good interpretation with sounds and smells.

Fantastic to be part of the design team, then to experience everyone's hard work. The performance was an honour to watch. Well done.

That was amazing! Props and acting were superb. What a way to spend Bonfire night. Thank you.

Moving/thought provoking. Fantastic. Beautiful use of books.

An excellent performance, also good from BSL interpreter. Well organised and good layout. Lovely to see the old building and full of character. It's important to help us to remember our country fought the first world war to protect us from the enemy. Well done. Excellent performance.

A fantastic performance! It was very moving and my students and I were intrigued by it. It was a highly entertaining and innovative performance. Aside from the performance, the Lit & Phil have been a great help to us

Superb, so moving. Well done by all.

Everyone should see it to understand where we have come from. Wonderful.

Absolutely incredible. Marvellous. Best ever.

Quite brilliant. Not only the quality of the acting but the use of the building. Fantastic details and pacing of the audience through the building and phases of horror and fun. Very well done.

A fantastic performance. I was mesmerised throughout. All the acting was superb and the sets and script were extremely sensitively done. I could watch it all again! Thank you!

Exceptional on all levels. At the end, especially, I was moved to tears. Many thanks to all.

Absolutely compelling. Amazingly done. Wonderful and heartbreaking.

Superb – thoroughly enjoyed it. Very well performed and produced.

Very moving. Very effective. The hospital was especially moving. Thoroughly enjoyed every minute.

Excellent. Last year's was good but this was superb. A credit to you all. Very sympathetic rendering of a great theme. Let's have more next year.

A beautiful, atmospheric and thought-provoking performance. I have never been in either building before and it was a wonderful experience to be able to see them in this way. Thank you. Encore!

Amazing! Beautifully produced and acted. Very emotional ending. Involving cadets makes the past real. Well done and thank you to everyone involved.

So moving and atmospheric. Well written and produced. And acting so [word not legible] and believable and such a good idea to involve the audience. Thank you all for such an enjoyable experience.

Excellent production – very moving and made special with all performers and the audience. Well worth the visit from Cheshire to see this performance.

Incredible! Really fantastic. Attention to detail wonderful, super acting, very atmospheric. Beautiful. Richard Bliss looks great in a uniform and even better in a dress!

Very moving. The 'hospital tent' was incredibly atmospheric and then the subsequent scenes built an amazingly emotional response with a combination of lovely design, music and performance. An amazing amount of skill and craft. Thank you all.

Brilliant. Hospital scene very moving – tears in my eyes. Needed more time to clap at end!

Brilliant. Congratulations. Very imaginative, innovative and moving. Up to your usual high standard. Thank you. I'm already a member and saw the NPC and your recent production about the history of the Lit and Phil. More of the same please.

Very moving and well done. Enjoyed it and will recommend it.

Congratulations on an excellent, thought-provoking performance with imaginative use of the library and institute buildings. The [way the] live performance could reproduce the appalling wet and mud of the trenches, to showing the (presumably) DVD was an admirable way of illustrating that aspect of the conflict. The lecture on the louse reminded me of my father describing how they reduced the population of those pests by running a lighted candle up and down the seams of their garments. I believe the ones that succumbed exploded with a pop! The field hospital scene with its less than pristine sheets gave an authentic air but the wounded soldiers should, perhaps, have had a little make-up used to tone down their rosy cheeks. They looked a little too hearty, especially as one was being visited by the chaplain! I am pleased I did not have to miss the Garrison Theatre Show and

the poignant ceremony of scattering the poppy petals as a finale. I would certainly hope to attend another such performance.

Excellent, innovative production. Great use of a very unique space. I'd not been to the Lit & Phil – what an amazing building and very creative use of the space. Very moving and lovely performances bringing to life the suffering of war, the joy of the parties and the claustrophobia of the trenches. Liked the different levels (being on the gallery looking down). Liked the live music and song. One comment – make sure kids in the audience get to be near the front for some scenes. I'd love to come to another production here (and even be in one!!). Thanks for a thought-provoking afternoon.

Absolutely splendid show, very moving and respectful of the subject. I was sceptical of the format but it worked beautifully.

This was splendid. Well done!

Brilliantly evocative trenches/trench-foot testing; the mortally wounded books. Lighting and music all good, all actors wonderful.

Thoroughly enjoyed this evening. Very interesting to see the different areas of two buildings I have never visited – but often passed. Well written, well set, well performed. Thank you!

Very evocative of a time it's hard to imagine, so a real achievement. The bloodied books a particularly simple and effective image.

Brilliant use of building. Especially the field hospital. Imaginative variety of scenes. Excellent.

Well planned using all the different spaces. Interesting text. An enjoyable evening's entertainment.

A moving and very cleverly made [show]. Lots of hidden meaning behind all of the different sets.

An excellent and very moving production in a magnificent building. Thoroughly enjoyed the singing and music hall entertainment. The graves in the hospital and the falling petals at the end were lovely touches. A splendid way to commemorate the fallen.

When I was in the ward moving round the beds, I thought I could feel the suffering of the patients who [had] lain in those beds. The building and the way we were led through was, I think, the perfect setting for this production. My father in law was in this war and I have read some of his letters to his mother.

Over the top – we the audience went – physically, visually and emotionally. The response to the venue was imaginatively outstanding from the bloodied books to the use of the library stacks as dugouts – visually memorable. In a most harrowing and realistic hospital scene the low, murmured words of the dying were...[incomplete sentence]

I have visited the Lit & Phil once before but I'm not a member. It is a wonderful building and you do seem to be doing a good job of raising awareness and encouraging the public to attend / visit. I thoroughly enjoyed the performance tonight. The battlefield scene was very effective. The final scene on the stairs, with poppies falling down, was very moving. I could easily have cried and saw that one person was. Thank you.

Nice set and costumes. Great singing. Did not bring home the horror of this war at all. Too tame. People too quiet. Fab building. Good effort.

I really thought this was a fantastic, enjoyable and very thought-provoking performance. The setting in the Lit & Phil was perfect. It really made the most of the rooms to set the atmosphere. Particularly enjoyed the female solo vocal performance in the hospital. Would love to see more of this again.

Very moving and thought provoking. Have never been to Lit & Phil but would come back again. Yes I would like to see more productions. It was well thought out and presented. I had certain reservations as to safety issues and concern for elderly members. Was a health and safety check carried out? But apart from that, I thought the whole performance including props and wardrobe and music excellent.

I thought the overall effect was great and as a child I fully understood it. I thought the actors were the best and really brought the play to life.

A dead heaves you work today
The hearts so heavy when it beats for two
The heart that beats heaviest of all
The battle is won by the men that fall.
Amazing.

The transformation into the hospital tent was interesting. The padre was good. The sound samples in the pillows could have been louder. The [illegible] and lightning were excellent. Thanks.

Emotional from the start to finish. How very, very clever. Skilful and moving. More please!

A remarkable piece of work. Thought provoking and wonderful use of both buildings.

What a moving show. The use of the space was fantastic –placing the audience right in the thick of it. Music too was haunting! Well done!! More please.

Very enjoyable. A good mix of comedy entertainment and sadness.

It was wonderful – very powerful and extremely moving. The end made me cry. The scene in the hospital ward was very well done – as was the bit in the trenches – in fact all of it! My only regret is that I didn't see last year's performance. I would certainly come to a future one. I've been to the Lit & Phil before for a poetry reading. New to the Mining Institute. What a wonderful use of the space. My daughter, 10, is filling in her own form. My son (12)also loved it. Thank you.

Very well thought out and put together. Informative. Some bits were a little on the quiet side. Maybe difficult for some people to hear.

Absolutely wonderful – based in the reality of the place and brought to life so creatively and poignantly. Your best one yet.

Very inventive. Amazing use of space, smell – everything. It's a pity all those dear books died – all bandaged and bloody. Thank you.

Incredibly evocative, very moving and very well presented. Thank you.

It was good how we moved around the building.

Deeply moving. Brilliant use of location and link with the Lit & Phil. The books as parcels/wounded/bodies was very effective. Lovely attention to details. Just the right balance of sorrow and humour. And a good balance of standing and sitting. Thank you. What an evocative experience.

This was an extraordinary and engaging performance piece. I haven't seen such an affecting piece of theatre for many years. Show this to as many people as you possibly can. Well done!

Another first class production.

Not a member. Never been here before. Yes would come again. Most surprising thing about performance – how moving it was. Yes would definitely come to other performances. Amazing building, very evocative. Great cast, musicians, etc. Can't get over what great idea.

Thought this was another excellent [production in the Lit & Phil – thank you. The attention to detail and beautiful use of the building were fantastic – an incredibly moving and poignant experience. Thank you for all the hard work and PLEASE DO MORE!

Unbelievably poignant. The journey through the life of the soldier and lives of those left behind was inspirational – WAR IS FUTILE! We knew the stories, history, but to live it like this – everyone who hasn't experienced it should do it! This was the first performance I'd experienced and I'll definitely look out for more. I'll certainly visit the Lit & Phil and Mining Institute again. Thank you.

Most moving piece – all the changes of scene were vivid and made up think and reflect. Haven't been to a performance here before. Would like everyone to see it!

Very effective and affecting piece of performance (sorry about handwriting. Am ...without my glasses). Beautiful juxtaposition of ideas and emotions. Beautifully choreographed and shaped (staged?). Found myself in tears from the lament (after Mittens song) to the end. Found the Chinese worker particularly affecting. Well done to all.

Very poignant. Thought the use of real voices/texts of the time was compelling. Fascinating the way material culture was employed to convey the significance of the event. Bravo.

So moving – so sad and full of the despair of loss. Your whole company performed with great care and distinction. The story must go on being told – you have found an original way to do this. Thank you.

Excellent. Very moving and entertaining performance. Loved the way it moved through the buildings.

Excellent! Very powerful – thought provoking!

First rate. Poignant and relevant.

First time at the Lit & Phil and I found it fascinating. Performance was excellent – extremely well done. Acting, signing and music were all brilliant. I would love to come back again.

Very powerful performances highlighted the impact of war on the Lit & Phil community. Loved the use of diaries and letters. Really interesting to see the two buildings as we moved through the play. Hospital scene most moving.

Thank you for inviting me. I didn't know what to expect. I thought it was so good. Very moving. So professional. I know the building well and the way the spaces were dressed was very good. Excellent.

Excellent performance bringing to life powerful emotions and true life reflections. Well done to the Lit & Phil. Everyone should come!

I enjoyed it. The play was very interesting and entertaining.

Really enjoyed the production. It was funny and serious in all the right places. All the actors were spot on. Thanks for an enjoyable afternoon.

Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. History lessons at school could never have taught me emotion like this performance.

I loved the performance. It made me so emotional at times I had to fight back tears. Wonderful. Thank you.

The performance, set, music and cast was amazing. I learnt a lot.

Excellent. Very moving. Fantastic use of the buildings.

Grim, intelligent and sensitive. A valuable experience. Congratulations.

Very good. Enjoyed it.

Very well performed. Very emotive. I am a member of the Lit & Phil. I would certainly come again and would love to see more.

Brilliant! I particularly liked the way there was sound and smells. Very poignant.

Well done the Lit & Phil. A fitting tribute on this the 90th anniversary since the 1914-18 war. The war supposed to end all wars. An excellent performance. Can't wait for your next production.

Wonderful presentation. Talented cast. Appropriate setting as I said, brought tears to my eyes and I could scarcely speak at the end. Cannot thank you all enough.

I thought it was very good!

Amazing use of building, and transformation. Beautiful writing, wonderful sensory experience. Fantastic performances all round. It was a very moving and thought-provoking piece and brought tears to my eyes. Thank you very much!

Thank you so much. Very good evening. Well done.

Excellent production – very well done and poignant. It is good to remember. Well produced and very well performed.

Everything about the performance was terrific. The writing was engaging, thoughtful, fun and sad. The music was appropriate and added to the atmosphere. The acting, staging and positioning of the audience worked very

well. Props were great and of course the building is fantastic. Well done. It was a great night. Would like to see more.

Wonderful! Just absolutely wonderful! It was a v good performance, which was well introduced in such a historical setting as the L&P library.

We thought it was just marvellous. I came through the Culture Club. The actors all gave a marvellous performance. The sets were really good and everything captured the atmosphere of the First World War. It really was so sad that so many lost their lives and suffered. The play had lighter moments too. Absolutely marvellous. I would definitely love to come back.

Comments from some of the 23 people who completed forms provided by Juice, NewcastleGateshead's festival for children and young people

It was great. Extremely effective.

Fantastic. It was very moving and made us think. Also, as teacher I was impressed with the impact it had on my students. A very valuable experience.

Brilliant like! Really loved all of it, especially singing about mittens.

Brilliant. Very moving and emotional.

Fantastic. I really enjoyed it. Touching end.

Very well thought out and imposing. Certain scenes did fall a little flat due to lack of contact with the audience (ie gas scene). Comic relief was well measured and effective.

Terrific show. It reminded me of *Oh What a Lovely War...*

Excellent. Very informative and interesting.

Great. A very good way of getting the feel for the war. Especially with the use of smell.

Very interesting, sad and the effects were great. The books with the bandages were a really good idea. And the comedian was a great idea after coming from a very sad part of the play.

Very good, very moving.

Interesting and fulfilled. Very moving.

An excellent educational performance.

Profound, poignant, well orchestrated. Fantastic. Thank you.

Fantastic. Really touching with a hint of comedy, which did present the stark realism of life back home.

Great! Very informative but entertaining.

It would take me 14 years to write all the compliments about *We Got Mittens Too*.

Very good and had a lot of information so I learnt a lot.

Good how we moved around the building.

Absolutely brilliant. Very informative and thought provoking.

Very influential and interesting. It gave a real insight into war life.
[Would like to have seen] more trench action.

Appendix 2 Reviews

Extract from Theatre Review 2008, The Journal, Barbara Hodgson, 23 December 2008

An absolute gem was home-grown promenade play *We Got Mittens Too!* at the Lit & Phil, Newcastle, in November, commemorating the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War.

Created by its head librarian Kay Easson – using former members' and staff's war-time letters, diaries and records – it transported us to the past: it was like seeing snapshots of lives and eavesdropping on conversations.

Thank goodness Health & Safety has not yet dictated that we can't have theatre in venues where audiences climb up and down stairs or stand on balconies, because this was the fun involved in following the local actors and cadets, and directors Maurice O'Connell and Alison Andrews, from scene to scene through the library and the adjoining Mining Institute.

With a trench map in hand, we sat in on a louse lecture; suffered a 'gas attack' in the bowels of the building; listened to the readings of soldiers' letters home; and enjoyed a glass of wine at a troops' concert party.

The recreation of a field hospital – some beds with patients; some empty and bloodstained; some planted with poppies – was extraordinarily powerful, as a padre spoke in hushed tones and nurses whispered in our ears about lack of medical supplies.

It reminded me of a theatrical mystery tour years ago to see *A Nest of Spices*, which guided us through a vast industrial unit near Wallsend's shipyards to witness evocative and symbolic scenes such as a field of coal with wandering ghostly figures.

I've often wondered why there isn't more theatre like it. But *We Got Mittens Too!* has left a similar impression.

The British Theatre Guide

**<http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/gotmittens-rev.htm>
Review by Gail-Nina Anderson (2008)**

The company producing and performing this remarkable piece of promenade theatre may officially be the European Players Company, but to those who saw their previous work at the Lit and Phil they are generally referred to by its title, The Novocastrian Philosophers' Club. And there is something appealingly clubbish even in the way they approach so massive a topic as World War I. For a start, this is site-specific, building-based theatre – and the building isn't a theatre. First you have to know where the august rooms of the Lit and Phil and the con-joined Mining Institute are, and it helps if you do read the small print and realise that as an audience you'll be tramping through them (and up and down some stairs constructed at a time when Health and Safety still allowed for a pioneering spirit and assumed you were wearing sensible shoes).

People who know the Lit and Phil tend to love it, not just as a library but as a landmark, a venue for classes and readings, a gentle reassurance of civilised values in an urban tradition. These enthusiasts are, I suspect, the main audience for the show, which thus functions as a reinforcement of all that the institute embodies. The building isn't just a site, it's the main player – and it has already created its own overture with a season of talks discussing different aspects of WWI, including its social and cultural impact viewed in a north-eastern context.

If the Library is the play, then it's fitting that the playwright is the Librarian. Kay Easson's researches into the period have provided the framework of words on which the work of a wide-ranging creative team is based – but with

the rare art of discretion, the sense of a “play” as a discrete element which exists outside the performance is absent. Instead we get a flow, a procession rather than a progress, that carries us from idea to idea via impressions not readily pinned down. While there isn’t a single narrative thread nor voice, there is the sense of a topic opening up via vignettes that sometimes fix us to the building and its users during the period of the war, and sometimes shift us to challengingly unfamiliar territory, so that our own role as audience varies between the collusive and the alienated.

To make this work, a certain amount of disorientation is necessary. Young soldiers in modern camouflage line the staircase as we follow up to a library where period attendants dance decorously with partners they never touch. Passages of personal reminiscence alternate with bursts of enthusiasm, reminding us that conflict generates a kind of background energy among those left back at home. We attend a lecture on fleas, the scourge of the trenches, and engage with complaints that the constant clacking of knitting needles is disturbing the peace of the library. But of course this is patriotic activity, woollen wear for the boys at the Front, and that domestic note is one of the connecting themes of the evening. The Germans’ cry of “Gott Mit Uns!” draws the British response “We Got Mittens Too!, and that capacity – endearing, encouraging and dangerous – to deal with the unthinkable by making it familiar re-echoes through the evening.

Obviously, the horrors of the conflict can’t be directly shown, but there are powerful ways of not showing them. Stretchers of bandaged and bloody books arrive for medical treatment, curiously poignant in this setting, and we become visitors in a camp hospital, where the beds may be occupied, empty or just flowered meadowland. The visual minutiae really do add the layers of resonance here, which makes it as much installation art as drama, encouraging a heightened level of audience awareness which is exhausting as well as involving. It’s a relief to sit down at a rawly energetic concert for the troops complete with sing-along and appalling jokes delivered with such spirit that you laugh at them. By this stage the audience is playing its own role, having absorbed the way small comforts become the essential tools of survival. Even so, knowing what we’re doing, when the tall chap in the white lace dress who’s been giving every suggestive nuance to Marie Lloyd’s “I Do Love You Cocky Now You’ve Got Your Khaki On” starts singing a different song, it still sends shivers down the spine.

This is subject-driven theatre, and perhaps there isn’t anything substantially new to say about the subject, but *We Got Mittens Too!* teases out local connections to create an elegiac, elegant and engaging tribute that marks a moment and calls up the memories of a time and place in a strangely moving manner.

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The Journal, David Whetstone, 5 November 2008

TO MARK the 90th anniversary of the end of the First World War comes a theatrical experience which brings to life the words of a conflict which is just about to pass beyond the last faint grasp of memory.

Kay Easson, head librarian at the Lit & Phil, has used the letters, the diary jottings, the minuted reports and other documents generated by the venerable library's staff and members to provide a vivid snapshot of that "war to end all wars" – a description encapsulating tragic innocence and optimism.

It's a promenade performance so the small audience is led from set to set within the library and neighbouring Mining Institute.

Professional actors under the directorship of Alison Andrews take the leading roles but uniformed members of Northumbria Army Cadet Force and girls from Newcastle College as nurses and the sisters and sweethearts back home are a poignant reminder of the youth of those who served and died.

There's plenty of humour – a lecture about the louse and a concert party with some jolly good songs and jokes. You will also get the impression that Britain's entire war effort was clothed and equipped by the Fenwick department store.

The horrors of war are not overlooked. We venture into a trench system in the bowels of the building, witness officers writing letters of condolence and are caught up in a gas attack before entering a field hospital.

The suffering is rendered in poetic fashion with flowers in the beds and bloodied bandages swathing the books which were sent out to entertain the troops. Now each book represents a fallen soldier.

Books are the stuff of life at the Lit & Phil. There are thousands of them but perhaps not as many as died in 1914-18.

This is a profoundly moving, informative and memorable show – a fitting tribute to those whom age never wearied nor the years condemned.

Blog, posted 6th November 2008 by 'Valdemar Squelch'
myhgwellsblog.blogspot.com/2008/11/we-got-mittens-too.html

This blog is dedicated to H.G. Wells, who in an ill-starred moment coined the phrase 'The war to end War'. It's sometimes misquoted as 'The war to end all wars', but few people know that Wells was the source of it, however it's remembered. Sunday is Remembrance Day, and it is ninety years since the Great War ended, and wars did not. And now for a theatrical review, of all things.

To explain - the German army's motto in both world wars was Gott Mit Uns, which translates as 'God (is) with us'. When the Tommies first heard this slogan they cleverly replied 'We Got Mittens Too!' while brandishing woollens that had been knitted for them. By their Auntie Agnes, in all probability.

That jocular phrase is the title of an interesting experiment in theatre I've just been immersed in. WGMT was performed at the Miners Institute and the adjoining Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. The performers included actors, musicians and members of the Northumbria Army Cadet Force.

Experimental theatre can be bloody awful, failing to impress on many levels at once. But here it worked. It was a bit like 'Oh! It's a Lovely War!' rewritten for Geordies, but that was fine. Amid the surroundings of a splendid Victorian building dedicated to the advance of learning (and where Joseph Swan first demonstrated the incandescent electric light) a small audience - thirty or less - were issued with a trench map each. We were then shepherded around the building, from scene to scene of a story we already knew, one that can be retold endlessly and yet never really be told in full or ended the right way.

Much of the performance was based on the journals of the Lit & Phil's (female) librarian, who discovered Conrad at the outbreak of the conflict and was understandably pleased. (I recalled that Conrad's only child was killed fighting for his father's adopted homeland.)

We pampered consumer types were recruited, lectured on lice, informed of the virtues of waterproof trench coats by a bloke from Fenwick's (big Newcastle store, very venerable), observed the munition factory girls playing footie (unladylike, said the local press), and visited casualties at a forward medical station. Cadets played some of the wounded, and this was one of several things that left me more upset than I would have expected.

There was also music, and jokes, and a free glass of wine. A drag artist who looked remarkably like David Walliams sang comically, then movingly. We had a sing along. The dead of Flanders we walked among were books from the vast, vaulted library, each volume bound in bloody bandages. Each book is a little world, as is each man. We left through a shower of petals, to me recalling both ancient triumphs and terrible sacrifices to unyielding gods.

As the Great War retreats into history - is lost to living memory - is it somehow becoming more real to us? When I was young, nobody talked about it much. But when I picked up some of the quaint postcards of the time, I recalled seeing one or perhaps several as a boy. Where did I see them? It could only have been in my maternal grandparents' house, where I often stayed. I have vague memories of hearing about a great-uncle who survived the Western Front, but who died long before I was born. Before the second Great War, in fact.

Phyllida Shaw, 12th January 2009