

GOODNIGHT MR TOM

adapted by David Wood from the novel by Michelle Magorian

Iminster Entertainments Society – Wednesday 6th December 2017

THE PLAY

I can well see why this play would appeal to an experienced and ambitious Society like IES – a great story which plucks the heartstrings, with a script adapted from a well-known and much-loved book, potentially quite a nice big adult cast but with plenty of doubling available, decent parts for three young actors and room for several more, and even the opportunity to have a real dog on stage (though probably not a squirrel, unless you have very skilful puppeteers available!). What better way of satisfying the membership while selling lots of tickets. I gather they are going like hot cakes!

But – like any adaptation of a story which is set in two completely different locations, the staging will be difficult. I can imagine a fairly abstract composite set, though I note that in his introduction David Wood suggests that Tom's cottage cries out for naturalism! Unfortunately he has chosen to write an awful lot of short scenes, hopping from one to another... Easy enough on paper, but translating this fluently to the stage, and linking them smoothly, will require an imaginative approach from your director and clever interpretation by your creative team. Luckily you will have lots of wartime songs to use to help with the flow, and he suggests several.

I saw this play done at the Edgar Hall in Somerton earlier in the Autumn season, which whetted my appetite. I very much look forward to seeing what you make of it at The Warehouse

THE PRODUCTION

Presentation

The tabs were open when we came into the auditorium and we could see Tom's cottage pre-set, and beautifully lit in a subdued but theatrical way. I always get a sense of quality from your settings at the Warehouse – it is very reassuring somehow... Later, when the cottage was struck and the hinged flats opened back to give us a different room, in London, with that horrid cupboard under the stairs, I realised how cleverly designed this had been. Admittedly there was a bit of a muddle and a certain amount of head-scratching, that first night, as to which flat to swing back where, but probably this could have been avoided with a bit more practice and I'm sure it was sorted as the run continued.

The rest of the settings were effectively created largely by the use of trucks, for the library desk, and the Post Office counter, and by the use of benches for the meeting in the church hall and in the air-raid shelter. The graveyard was indicated perfectly well with a gravestone over on the piano area and I thought this was all you needed. The 'London station' referred to in the script turned out to be Waterloo (actually Paddington would probably have been better considering Little Weirwold was somewhere down this way, but no matter) but just opening the crew access doors and lighting the cyc blue with a drop-in sign and plenty of smoke worked fine. However, David Wood had suggested that the country should have an "open-air" feel about it, and London should be dark and closed in. I wondered therefore whether you had considered using that lovely blue cyc effect throughout the scenes when we were in the village? You did show black flats when we were in London. I thought some of the signage worked perfectly well – 'Waterloo', for instance, was well constructed and lettered, but the floor-based newspaper headlines in the Post Office looked a bit amateurish, in my opinion, and deserved more attention. It was unfortunate that the sign indicating the way to the air-raid shelter fell off moments after it had been stuck up – this, like a number of other bloopers that opening night, brought an appreciative roar of laughter from sections of a cheerfully unsophisticated audience, for whom no doubt the mistakes they saw merely served to reinforce the 'am-dram' stereotype. This was such a pity, in my opinion.

Set-dressing and furnishing was mainly confined to a table covered with a cloth, which doubled up in both Tom's cottage and Mrs Beech's house I would think, good 40s-looking dining-room chairs, a tree stump for

Tom to sit on stage R, and that excellent child's bed which I would guess had been made specially, on nice big castors, and worked fine for William, both in the cottage and in the hospital.

Lighting (Brian Perkins and Mike Morgan) was good in parts. Nicely atmospheric but sometimes rather underlit I thought. This was perfectly acceptable when we were supposed to be in relative darkness but, for instance, I was a little frustrated not to be able to see Charlie's face properly because it was so much in shadow from his ARP helmet. Could you not have used a bit more front light, I wondered, for those scenes set upstage? I do realise however that you had an awful lot of scenes to light, and probably a very complex plot. The blue-lit cyc was lovely and cool but the red flashes used to indicate the bombing raid were rather underwhelming. Zach's special was fine, and after a

Sound by Jim Hawkrige was used a lot and was pretty effective I thought, with good levels for the recorded songs. Your recording of the Newsreader's voice was beautifully done – no credit in the programme, but I assumed you had recorded it in-house and added a bit of crackle and hiss to add authenticity. The recording of Chamberlain's "state of war" speech must, I thought, have come from an archive somewhere – it is so real that it still gives me a slight chill whenever I hear it. But what happened to Churchill? There was an awkward hiatus at about this time and I thought perhaps the expected recording had failed for some reason. Eventually the twins came on and sang G.A.S.M.A.S.K and we were back in business, but it did feel a bit clunky. You had created an acceptable muffled baby crying I thought – well localised to the cupboard, and with a slight increase in volume as William opened the door, well done. Also we had a bit of Sammy's whining and a couple of barks I seem to remember – I was watching to see if Taylor would react but I don't think he did – the whole experience must have been so confusing for him!

Props by Ros Ure and Lola Rowell Adamson were plentiful and helpful I thought. The potty under the bed looked just right, as did Rachel's lovely period wooden art-box, and the adapted hurricane lamp. There were a sensible number of books on the desk at the library (and I was impressed to see William with a copy of what looked like a genuine copy of *Orlando The Marmalade Cat*), and a reasonable amount of green-grocery stuff for sale at the Post Office. Everyone had a box for a gas-mask I noted – though you had clearly decided not to bother with them once you'd established them; Charlie would have been apoplectic! What a lot of candles you had put on William's cake! Obviously too many to light, and to blow out, but this was a missed opportunity for a nice theatrical effect. The vintage bicycle looked good, as did the pram later. The radio on the trolley in the church hall was nice. I very much wanted to see some of "William's work", and got the impression you had had quite good child-like water-colour paintings done by somebody, but they were never shown to us, sadly. Rachel's *Sea and Sky*, presumably in reality a commercial print, had been well chosen. Both Dr Little and Tom had empty pipes to suck on – much easier to manage than cigarettes, and I noted that the good doctor used Swan Vestas; nice. Tea pot and crockery looked suitable for the period, the pop bottles were great, and wooden swords were fine. The masks for Toad of Toad Hall were functional and realistic under the circumstances, and I thought both poor Trudy and later Peggy were perfectly adequate babies. Perhaps the only things which looked slightly out of place were the coddled spades – compared to that well-weathered fork they looked rather too modern, despite the spray paint.

Costume was an enormous job, especially since only one person is credited – well done, Nicola Griggs! Nothing jarred either, apart from a lot of modern footwear, but this is awfully difficult, especially for youngsters. Lace-ups for Zach I noticed (well done) and those boots for William, which looked as though they might be dreadfully uncomfortable because the tongue was folded in, but rather too many Velcro fastenings among the other children. Amongst the adults I thought you made a good job of the ARP Wardens, the nurses looked about right, and so did the policeman. David Hartridge's uniform was well-sourced – nice forage cap and blue serge battle-dress, but no wings or indication of rank that I could see. It didn't matter though – you were clearly going for representational costume rather than complete authenticity. Among the civilians everyone looked appropriate dressed and it was good to see most of the women in hats. I thought Mr Tom looked the part in his country tweed jacket, with leather patches on the elbows, and corduroy trousers. Mr Stelton's double breasted dark suit was very nice. The identical school uniforms for Carrie and Ginnie were a good idea and Zach's trademark rainbow jersey was quite a find, unless you got it specially knitted, in which case – wizard, as he would probably have said!

Hair and make-up looked OK except that I thought you might have gone to town on giving William a nice florid bruise on his leg, as scripted. I didn't see any evidence of the physical abuse he'd suffered from where I was sitting in Row E and of course he never did take his jumper off so we could see his arms. I thought the children could have had a bit of fun getting grubbed up too – I believe baths were taken weekly in those days, and then only if they were absolutely necessary... There was an opportunity to create lots of gory casualties for the hospital rescue scene, but I assume your director decided against this.

All in all, considering the complexity demanded by this play, I thought presentation values were pretty high and that your Production Team had served you very well.

Direction

I'm going to deal with Stage Management in this section because your vision for the play, Ruth (at least I have to assume it was yours) meant that the black gang played a very large a part in the production we saw. And I'm going to address it first, because I think we need to put it behind us and move on.

The decision to clear the stage of one setting and then construct another between virtually every scene was a terrible idea in my view! Despite having four in the crew, who worked quickly and quietly, and made extremely good use of those clever hidden doors, it just took too long and, frustratingly, was so unnecessary. Moreover it destroyed any pace you'd managed to generate and meant that 'flow' was lost. In fact I was surprised to find myself feeling that we'd even lost contact with the play, because the antics of the crew occupied so much stage time, and I think this probably accounted for the perceptible change in the attitude of the audience, who seemed to be looking for things to laugh at. A classic example was the enormous roar of laughter when Ken Steed as Mr Tom is looking up at George Montague towering over him outside the cottage and makes the mistake of calling him Dr Little (in fact the script here says "Thanks, Doctor"). It did indeed look absurd, and very funny, but I don't believe it would even have occurred to us to laugh if we'd been as emotionally involved with the story as we needed to be – especially since they were discussing how to help William deal with the dreadful psychological trauma he had experienced.

Why, I wondered, couldn't Tom's cottage, with the doorway, the table and chairs, the stove and the bed, be left, just as it was, throughout the first act? You might have wanted to strike the loaf of bread, and the frying pan maybe, but one person could have done this in a few seconds whilst the next truck was being wheeled into place. There was plenty of room up R or downstage on both sides for little inset scenes like the library and the Post Office, and if you'd put them on different sides of the stage, with focal lighting, you could probably be setting the next scene while the previous one was coming to an end. This sort of solution means that the play flows and I think is crucial to the success of a production with so many scenes and locations. And although it is only the first two thirds of the second act which takes place in London, the composite set required for this could all be set up in the interval. Then, with very tight focal lighting and strong movement around the bed in the nightmare scene to maintain our attention, I reckon it could be converted back to Tom's cottage without us even noticing.

Incidentally it always amazes me how little information an audience needs in order to accept that a particular part of the stage is, for instance, a picnic spot. Put down a rug and open a hamper and immediately our imagination fills in the rest very nicely – the meadow, the trees, the sunshine, the birdsong. It is nice if you can give us a blue cyc in the background, but it really isn't necessary. And of course you made very good use of this ready suspension of disbelief with just such a scene in this play. Lovely. My point is that sometimes we directors get hung up on the literal and forget that the audience is on our side – if we don't specifically light some part of the set then they won't even see it; they *want* to believe and they *want* to suspend disbelief. And all they ask is that you establish a clear set of rules and then obey them – it is inconsistency which gives them a problem.

I usually try to provide a balanced critique in these adjudications, and find examples of good practice as well as things which could have worked better, but I regret to say that the poor choices made in the staging of this production just went on and on. So, with apologies...

I felt the production needed quite a bit more rehearsal. Your programme notes suggest that you put all this together in just under two months and I'm afraid it showed; I would have set aside at least 12 weeks for such a complex show. Finn as William, for instance, looked a bit lost at times, and a major hiatus occurred on his first morning in Little Weirwold, when he was getting dressed rather slowly and hesitantly, sitting on the bed while poor Ken sat on his stump outside and tried to extemporise to cover the silence. Awkward. And Ursula, as Mrs Fletcher, seemed to have forgotten which of the two boys was her son George and let rip at William initially in her fury over the bullying. And though it is almost unheard of for youngsters to need prompting, I'm afraid Zach did – twice, I seem to remember. I appreciate that with two teams you need twice as many dress rehearsals as you would normally, but this needed to be factored in, and is really no excuse.

Though the stage crew worked silently on stage, there was a great deal of noise from the wings. Presumably they were awfully crowded with people waiting to come on and inevitably wing discipline hadn't yet been established, because of lack of rehearsal time, as well as having lots of relatively inexperienced people in the cast. In addition you had Taylor to contend with, and of course had to find room for his handler, Gill. As a result it sounded as though set items were being knocked over on at least 2-3 occasions. I can imagine that Rachel Lawrence, as Stage Manager, was in despair!

I really liked the way you had arranged the meeting in the church hall – those lovely old wooden forms allowed some of the adults to sit down, with others standing behind them, and then the children splayed in front of the group – all focussed on the vicar with his radio mid-stage L. It was a very pleasing stage picture. You obviously thought so too, because you reproduced almost exactly the same picture when they were in the air-raid shelter in Act 2! Why? It just seemed so unimaginative... at very least, I thought, set it up the other side of the stage so that we would have an intriguing mirror image.

And one more very puzzling choice; Maddie Lowe coming back as the social worker, sitting in the same position at the same table (albeit in the cottage this time), and in much the same colours as Mrs Beech had worn, telling William that his mother had killed herself, not 5 minutes after we'd seen her in his nightmare. It was unnecessarily confusing! Surely there was someone else in the cast who could have doubled up and played the social worker – Bethan Moran for instance.

There were of course lots of good things to enjoy in this production, and I will try to cover them as part of my appreciation of the acting, but just a word here about Taylor, the dog. It was a brave idea to cast a real Border Collie in the role of Sammy, and his performance certainly evoked lots of very positive reaction in the audience – mainly sentimental 'aahs' because he was awfully cute, but also a certain amount of sympathetic laughter because clearly he felt rather ill at ease on stage with all the lights, and couldn't wait to dash back to his mistress in the wings. Later on in the play someone, who I assume was Gill, came on stage and was able to give him lots of reassurance (and tidbits) which helped settle him down a bit. David Wood had written Sammy into many of the scenes, presumably because he knew the dog would be 'played' by a puppeteer in the professional version, but I think there might have been a case for reducing the amount of times we saw Taylor – mainly because inevitably he stole all our attention and therefore changed the focus of the action. The essence of this play is the human story – about both William and Tom finding in each other the most extraordinary friendship, powerful enough to let them escape their darkness and to repair their broken lives. *That's* the story the director needs to tell, and in order to fully appreciate the emotional journey that these two lonely, damaged people are about to take, it is helpful to keep the distractions to an absolute minimum – and that includes prompts, noises off, dogs and stage crew!

Acting

Evacuees etc:

I hope you will understand if I just make some general remarks about the young people in this production, though I will of course have some specific comments later for those who were named in the programme as appearing on Wednesday evening. My main point is that it was great to see so many of you cast in a serious play alongside quite a few adults. It was a fantastic opportunity to appear on stage in front of a full house and I

hope it will encourage you to do more and to develop your skills. Some of you, however, haven't yet quite got over the novelty of having an audience, and seemed to spend quite a bit of time looking out into the auditorium. Maybe you were hoping to spot people you know? This is a complete no-no as far as I am concerned, and I'm quite sure that Lucy will have warned you not to do this! If you are acting you need to decide who you are playing, and *be* them, and they don't have relatives in the audience... Even if you don't have lines, you can have a character – often of your own choosing, and he or she will have a name, and will live somewhere, and have a particular friend at school etc etc. The great thing is that the only limit here is your imagination. It's fun just being someone else for a short while, and I did see some of you watching and listening in character – in the church hall scene for instance, and playing cards in the air-raid shelter.

Billeting Officer – Gill Walker

You had a nice little scene at the start of the play before becoming part of the villager ensemble and the Londoners in the air-raid shelter. I thought you seemed a little diffident in your handling of the evacuee children and that you might have found a louder singing voice and more of a bossy persona with them, to provide some contrast with her deflation in the face of Mr Oakley's forbidding manner!

Tom Oakley – Ken Steed

Looked and sounded very much the part, I thought, though his prickly exterior melted pretty quickly when faced with William's vulnerability, and the relationship was very charming and credible. I think you put in an extra line when William tells him he loves him, quite late on in the play... I'm sure I heard Mr T say "I love you too, boy" as scripted – and then "and I haven't said that for 40 years". It made me realise just how bleak his life had been until then, and it moved me greatly. Well done. The end though was a bit of an anti-climax – I think you needed to hold the pause quite a bit longer while Mr T digests what William has just said, and we digest it with him. It is such an emotional moment when he becomes 'a father' to someone again and could easily have had us sobbing if the timing had been right.

William Beech – Finn Moran

This is such a difficult role to play at your age, Finn, and I congratulate you for taking it on. What I liked was your ability to seem so shy at the start, and then show steadily increasing confidence as the villagers took him to their hearts. The friendship with Zach was particularly well conveyed I thought. Remember however that at least some of the audience will be looking at you every moment that you are on stage, so you cannot afford to stop being William – and I watched you lying in bed with your eyes open, listening perhaps, at a time when I was pretty sure William was supposed to be asleep! Also, your eyes kept straying to the centre of the front row, even while you were speaking, though I didn't see you make eye contact there and I wondered if it was a left-over from rehearsal? Is that where your director, or perhaps your prompter, sat? You must learn to look your fellow actors in the eye; it makes your performance more believable.

Charlie Ruddles/Mr Stelton – John Tyler

You could not have portrayed two more different characters and I had to check the programme afterwards to make sure! Nice, comical cameo as the village ARP Warden and then an extremely sinister portrayal of Mr Stelton, with the impeccable white hair and beautiful suit. You didn't do much – just used a very level, well-enunciated voice, but you made him seem extraordinarily evil, and really rather scary, because of the intensity with which you played him. Well done.

Mrs Fletcher/Glad – Ursula McKinlay

Somehow I felt that Mrs Fletcher was a bit under-rehearsed; the lines didn't seem entirely secure, although I don't remember you taking a prompt, and it worried me that you didn't look upon George as your son... Mind you, you were working with two Georges and two Williams and I can imagine you might easily get them muddled! 'Glad' seemed to suit you much better and I liked this chirpy portrayal.

Dr Little – George Montague

What a quirk of fate, being cast as a man whose name so belied your own stature! On Wednesday night, however, it provided the audience with their biggest laugh of the evening. Even though I fundamentally disapproved of this distraction, I couldn't help chuckling, and was very impressed to see that neither you or Ken cracked a smile. Bravo. I thought your portrayal of this gentle, and extremely sensible, country GP was spot-on. How reassuring to hear a medical man prescribing good food and plenty of rest as treatment for complex psychological damage – and of course he was right. As Mr Tom says “all ‘e needs is a bit o’ love”. Good job.

Annie Hartridge – Iona Davis

I last saw you, Iona, as a young teenager in *Kindertransport* a good many years ago. How lovely to see you still acting and to find that you have blossomed into an actor who can play a very credible young wife, still with excellent stage presence and now with a beautiful vocal delivery. Her pride in her young husband when we first meet her was so convincing, and her restrained grief in Act 2, mingled with sympathy for William, was palpable. Very well done.

Carrie & Ginnie – Annie Ashdown & Rhianna Wilkinson

Apologies for lumping you together but, though you created very well-differentiated characters, you were always together – except for Carrie's nice little scene when we hear that she is going to High School and is bursting with pride. The picnic was well handled and both of you saved the day by coming on and doing the G.A.S.M.A.S.K chant with pat-a-cake. I think actually this could have been a bit slower so that we could enjoy the words – they seemed a little rushed. I would guess you have both had quite a bit more acting experience than most of the others – good to see.

George Fletcher – Archie Davis

How interesting that your character is told by Mr Tom to slow down when he comes to bring the second-hand jumper and to apologise for bullying! I think you too would have benefitted from a slower delivery – it seemed a bit gabbled, possibly because you were nervous. It's a very common problem but I hope you can learn to speak in a more controlled way, and project a character, if you continue to attend youth theatre sessions. You were the instigator in the singing of *Vacee Vermin*. I wish someone would put in a substitute for the *London's Burning* lines – Fire, Fire - Fire, Fire! What do you reckon – maybe Boo, Hoo – Boo, Hoo?

Miss Thorne – Jo Neagle

A nice little cameo role, Jo, which suited you well I thought. Good warmth and understanding, and a bit of fun with the local amateur dramatics group – just a touch of asperity with Zach, which made us realise that there was potentially an iron fist in that velvet glove, and deepened the portrayal nicely.

Zach – Daniel Baker

You were well cast in this role, Daniel, and seemed to be enjoying it hugely – it suited your tigger-like qualities! You brought lots of energy with you whenever you entered and you made the character very believable. However you do need to slow down a little because I think we tended to miss some of your words in your haste to get them out. You also needed a bit more rehearsal time in view of some insecurity with lines, unless this was just a lapse of concentration because of the excitement of performing. I think I would have asked you to cut the bit about tap-springs, since (like me) you appear to have two left feet, and also the line about Buster Keaton, which was meaningless unless you really were standing in a trench – not something you can mime really! Good collapse at the end.

Mr Miller/ARP Warden in London – Rob Lewis

Two very nice warm cameos. I was amused to see that Mr Miller not only ran the PO stores but also doubled as local postman, delivering the mail. It was slightly confusing to see an ARP Warden from London suddenly appearing the country, but it's in the script and he had lines, not to mention the fact that the local ARP warden, Charlie Ruddles, was busy being Mr Stelton at that moment, so the audience just had to deal with it!

Miss Miller / Ticket Collector – Emily Dugdale

I think I saw you earlier this year, Emily, in *Far From The Maddening Crowd*. It is good to see you on stage again – this time in two roles; as Miss Miller in the shop, giving William a hard time (rather unfairly as it turned out!) and later as a cockney Ticket Collector – a nice sparky little scene with Tom. You should have got more of a laugh on your last line: “’Ope ‘e ain’t a German spy!” but I thought you rather threw it away, and maybe it needed more pointing and a comedic delivery.

Vicar / Policeman – John Ralph

Again this doubling worked fine. You didn’t have a lot to work with, the Vicar being a very small but necessary role, but I did feel for him being press-ganged into playing Badger, poor chap. We hardly recognised you under the helmet, and you had very few lines, but you created a suitably authoritative figure I thought.

Mrs Beech/ Social Worker – Maddie Lowe

I thought you were very scary as Mrs B – a good role to get your teeth into, and you really made this character extremely unsympathetic. I did wonder whether you might have been a bit more physical with William – obviously not to the extent of actually hitting poor Finn, but by appearing to twist his ear, or grab his hair, or pulling his face very close to yours while berating him, to justify his cowed behaviour. Well done, anyway – you made quite an impression on me with this performance.

Nurse – Zuleika Driver

What a pleasure it was to hear a young person speaking so clearly and confidently on stage – you provided a very good role model for some of the younger members of the cast to emulate. I believed in the character you created, who was clearly a sympathetic one, and admired your excellent, and unselfconscious, stage presence. Next, I think you could work on varying tone, pitch and speed of delivery, so as to make it a little less measured, especially if you have longer speeches. Keep up the good work though!

Sister – Bethan Moran

A tiny role with just a few lines but you made a great impact as the autocratic ward sister – nicely done.

SUMMARY

I am very much aware that I have been unusually critical of the direction of this difficult play, and I realise that this will be hard to accept. The job of director can be a very lonely one, and I wonder if you, Ruth, felt you had enough support? There is plenty of experience available in IES...

Perhaps you will take comfort from the fact that you had four very cheerfully uncritical capacity audiences and will have created a very memorable experience for your large cast and crew.

Thank you very much for inviting me to adjudicate. If I have failed to credit anyone for their contribution, or got any details wrong, please let me know.

Philip de Glanville

11.12.17