

Review: Theatre in the Quarter presents Over By Christmas

Production "captures the spirit of optimism and patriotism that propelled Britain through the First World War"

★★★★★

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 By [Frances Barrett](#) Editor
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WHAT'S ON OPINION



 Theatre in the Quarter presented their choral tribute to the First World War, Over by Christmas, at the Old Station Site in [Blacon](#) (Image: Frances Barrett)

Passing cyclists and dog-walkers who stumbled across the cast of Over by Christmas milling about the Old Station Site in [Blacon](#) yesterday could be forgiven for thinking they'd stepped into a time warp.

Men and women, young and old, clad in convincing 1914 finery delivered a choral tribute to those who were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for their nation.

Hundreds turned out to be transported back to those bleak days when families routinely gathered on the platforms of their local stations and waved goodbye to their sons and daughters bound to fight or nurse on the Western Front, not knowing whether they would return.

▸ Over by Christmas at Blacon



VIEW GALLERY 



Clocking in at under half an hour, Over by Christmas is less a play, more a vignette, created by [Theatre in the Quarter's](#) writer-in-residence Helen Newall and the company's founder and artistic director [Matt Baker](#).

Other destinations on their whistlestop tour of 24 stations across Cheshire and Greater Manchester include [Frodsham's](#) period railway station and the bustling Manchester Piccadilly.

But, following yesterday's performance, Matt Baker declared the site of Blacon's old station 'one of the best outdoor theatres in Chester' and revealed it may well have been one of the cast's favourites.

Kick starting proceedings with a rousing rendition of wartime favourites Daisy Bell and It's a Long Way to Tipperary, members of the audience threw themselves into the spirit of the utterly accessible production.

A newspaper boy brandishing a copy of the Chester Chronicle who invited people to read all about events such as the Battle of Mons and fatal bomb blasts on home soil was a clever way of signposting the plot and served as a reminder that there was no let-up in the sufferings during those four years of the First World War.

In a performance charged with emotion, the most moving part for me came when the Last Post was played as the cast raised poppies in the air.

I stole a peek at my fellow audience members at one stage and was met with a sea of engaged, enthralled faces.

The second act comprised a musical contribution from pupils of nearby schools Blacon High, Dee Point Primary, The Arches and St Theresa's Community Primary.

As the children sang 'if I had been there at the station when the steam train pulled away, I would have thanked you for our nation, for your sacrifice that day', it brought it home to me that they could so easily have been the ones who were saying goodbye to their siblings or going off to join the war effort themselves if they had been born a century earlier.

And that's where Over by Christmas really excelled, in getting the right balance between pathos and over-sentimentality.

It captured the spirit of optimism and patriotism that propelled Britain and communities just like Blacon through the First and Second World Wars, all the while subtly offering insights into the pain and tragedy that touched so many.

I asked a couple of ladies following the performance for their thoughts.

Ann Mulliner, from Saughall, had already attended one of the morning performances and told me she was already looking forward to seeing it at the Vernon Institute in Saughall on Saturday (September 27).

And that is surely what you want to inspire in your audience - a yearning to see it again and again.

The fact that aforementioned cyclists and dog-walkers stopped to watch this exquisite production is testament to the cast's vibrancy and the beauty of free, accessible and open-air theatre.

Over by Christmas was an ambitious project but - to borrow a phrase from the era - by golly, has it succeeded.

The production is also calling at the following stations:

- Thursday, September 25: Manchester Piccadilly at 11am, noon and 1.30pm
- Saturday, September 27: Hadlow Road, station platform, Willaston at 11am and 12.30pm
- Saturday, September 27: Vernon Institute, Saughall at 2pm
- Sunday, September 28: Poynton, outside station ticket office at 11am
- Sunday, September 28: Macclesfield station car park at 12.30 and 2.30pm