

Honour

By Helen Newall
Directed by Matt Baker

Artistic Director, Craig Morrison

Commissioned by Quays Culture
For production on The Plaza, Salford Quays, August 2014
to commemorate the commencement of WW1
and to honour the regiments of the region.

Characters

The Mother – a Salford woman
The Lad – her son
The Officer – A recruiting officer.

HONOUR

SCENE 1:

MOTHER Manchester

LAD Salford

OFFICER 1914

MOTHER And it's hot enough to melt the stones.

OFFICER August Bank Holiday Weekend.

MOTHER Holiday or no: there's still washing to be done.

LAD It was hot, though, that Monday.

OFFICER Hot as we waited in the mess for the news.

LAD A day off's a day off.

MOTHER I scrubbed the step.

OFFICER I read the papers.

LAD And the lads and me raced down the dock to look at the ships as
the dusk settled in, laughing and dreaming of the lasses we never
dared ask for a dance.

MOTHER I folded sheets and scraped out the hearths.

OFFICER I smoked a pipe.

MOTHER And then I settled to stitch hems.

OFFICER We opened a bottle of good port.

MOTHER He wasn't home, my lad.

LAD We were watching swallows skimming over the water.

OFFICER This was the lull before the storm.

LAD I says: 'One of these days I'll be on one of them boats going
somewhere important.' 'Like as heck you will,' Samuel says. 'You'll
be down the mine like your da.'

WOMAN So I sewed, pricking my fingers by candlelight.

OFFICER We watched the last hour tick on.

WOMAN The candle flame guttering.

OFFICER Waiting in silence.

WOMAN Checking the clock on the mantel.

LAD And it seemed as if the stillness would last forever.

WOMAN The hands on the clock moved so slowly.

LAD The last long light of August gleaming on the oily black water.

OFFICER And at midnight we are at war...

LAD Darkness over the water

WOMAN I blew out the candle.

LAD I went home.

OFFICER We raised a toast to his majesty.

LAD I crept in through a back window. Like I always do. But this time all hell's let loose.

WOMAN Where the blooming heck have you been?

OFFICER It all seemed so much sabre rattling.

MOTHER But then the next evening, Tuesday, I'm taking petticoats to the Big House when Mrs Tyldesley grabs my arm. 'Have you heard what they're saying?' she says.

LAD There's going to be a war!

OFFICER We're calling up the Reserves.

MOTHER And then it was the hour, with all the factory hooters going off, mournful like, and the street lamps winking on in the dusk. And all the trams and the horses and the wagons clattering and people shouting. And back in the lanes, the clopping of the clogs on the cobbles. And I remember thinking, how can there be a war?

OFFICER	We have a superior army and a cavalry second to none: I am confident this will all be over by Christmas.
LAD	But they're wanting more soldiers.
MOTHER	'So, will your lad go?' Mrs Tyldesley says. Will he heck. He'll do what he's told.
LAD	Why not have an adventure before it's all over!
OFFICER	We don't breed cowards in this part of the North. Your country needs you.
LAD	Twenty one shillings a week! And no more scrabbling through the coal-dark mine.
MOTHER	He couldn't kill anyone, my lad: he's daft as a brush.
OFFICER	I want to speak to those men of Salford who are young and able bodied. Those able-bodied men who have no work to do at home can find work to do of a noble kind elsewhere.
LAD	They're all queuing up at the Lads Club, my pal says.
OFFICER	Join the Pals regiments, boys; join up with your friends
LAD	We best get down there quick before it's all over.
MOTHER	You've got a job here.
LAD	But my pals are all going.
OFFICER	The Manchester Pals; the Salford Pals
LAD	No more coughing coal dust for a daily pittance.
OFFICER	The Eccles Pals; the Patricroft Pals, the Swinton Pals
LAD	I'm taking the King's Shilling!
OFFICER	And this will be a war to end all wars.
MOTHER	And they marched 'em off, my lad among 'em.
LAD	Bit of training in North Wales before the proper party begins.

MOTHER The South Salford Silver Band playing them a send off.

LAD Don't fret, mother! I'll be back before you know it.

MOTHER And people were playing tin whistles and melodeons and singing and shouting as they went off.

OFFICER And who could see the march of the twelve thousand without knowing that of this his children's children will be told? We are living history.

The soundscape then rises filling the air with the sound of recorded voices

VOICE/OVER Your Country Needs You

VOICE/OVER Women of Lancashire by Keeping your sons and ... (*voice is lost in sound of machines*)

SCENE II: Waiting for the Attack. Trench / then a night sky.

OFFICER Out in the trenches.

LAD Out in some hell I didn't sign up for.

OFFICER Keep your heads down!

LAD Bloody snipers!

MOTHER I'm proud of what you're doing, lad.

OFFICER For King and country.

MOTHER Send me a letter. Tell me the news.

OFFICER I write letters.

LAD How do I write about lice and flies and standing on dead men's faces?

OFFICER I regret to inform you...

MOTHER Tell me you're alive.

OFFICER You will be comforted to know he died a soldier doing his duty for his king and country.'

LAD Only 2 killed so far. We're lucky. We're God's Own.

OFFICER Hold your nerves, lads. This can't go on forever.

LAD I met a man who wrote of blood like rain. War is the enemy, he said: war is the real enemy. And he was right. We're in this together, my enemy and me. Together we lie in mud in the rain and the blood.

OFFICER And now they're sending ammunition up the line.

LAD But rain has stopped. There's a chaos of mud. But the rain has stopped.

OFFICER At each dump, five thousand mortar rounds; twenty two thousand grenades; two million rounds of small arms ammunition

LAD And with it all come the rumours of something big.

OFFICER The Big Push.

LAD It'll be the end of it all. The last battle. We'll be home by Christmas 1916.

MOTHER I'm sending you socks. I'm sending you all my love.

OFFICER Orders, lads. This is it.

LAD We're the Lucky Ones. We'll sail through this.

OFFICER And then a week of bombardment starts.

LAD The thunder of guns and big mud explosions of earth and blood and bone

OFFICER Our artillery hammering their wire for the Big Push.

LAD Shaking the earth.

OFFICER It goes on and on.

MOTHER Tell me. Write me.

LAD A week of our shells hitting their trenches.

OFFICER Nothing could survive that. That's what we thought.

LAD And it keeps on battering. Battering their trenches. Battering their wires. Battering my nerves.

MOTHER It's so quiet in the house without you.

OFFICER And then the silence falls.

LAD A ringing silence.

OFFICER And in that silence the larks are singing in the blue.

LAD And we hear the cries of the lost men lying out in No Mans Land.

OFFICER They lie dying and calling for their mothers.

MOTHER Write me a letter.

OFFICER And I write home that there was no suffering in their deaths.

LAD And then he takes out his pistol, and gets out his watch.

OFFICER 'Men in the trenches or in the assaulting brigades will not fall out to bring back the wounded.' It's been an honour to serve with you.

LAD And he smiles and nods his head.

MOTHER I'm sending you prayers.

OFFICER And good luck.

MOTHER I'm waiting for letters. Always waiting.

OFFICER Fix bayonets. 5 and 6 over the top on my command.

LAD And he looks at his watch.

OFFICER Waiting for the moment

LAD Waiting for the signal

MOTHER Waiting.

OFFICER Wait.

LAD Wait

OFFICER Wait.

FX: A LONG WHISTLE BLOW

LAD The signal.

OFFICER The signal, lads.

MOTHER Keep safe.

LAD And he climbs the parapet, leading the charge, and we follow.

OFFICER This is it men. Good luck.

SCENE III: Attack Sequence

LAD And we're over the top. Over the parapet.

OFFICER Keep walking! Keep steady!

MOTHER Keep safe

LAD We're out there. Out in No Man's Land. He falls then, the Officer. Hand clutched to his throat. And we walk on. Out, floundering through the wire and through the storm of bullets and the blood and the mess and the mud and the shell holes and the dying, crying, crawling men and the shattered land and the pitted pockmarked earth and the split black trees and the dead faces and the falling men and the blasted limbs and hands and bullets. The bullets. The bullets. No Man's Land. No Man's land. Chaos. And blood like rain... (*overtaken by sound and noise*).