

FIGHTING WORDS

Marianka Swain marched to *Oh What A Lovely War* at Richmond Theatre on February 10

When Joan Littlewood's iconic musical premiered in 1963, its revisionist condemnation of World War I sent shockwaves through British society. Now, criticising bungling generals is preaching to the choir, and the stoic Tommy has been reclaimed. Having inspired a slew of similarly irreverent works, *Oh What A Lovely War*'s satirical rage doesn't burn quite so brightly.

Terry Johnson's deferential revival recreates the original conceit: a sprint through the conflict, taking pot shots at absurd power plays and the icy cynicism of profiteers, framed by an end-of-pier Pierrot show. Johnson's slick production, with

a smart set from Lez Brotherston, juxtaposes jaunty light entertainment and music hall patter with stark horror, as an electronic ticker tape offers silent reproach through its mindboggling casualty numbers.

A versatile company of 12, supported by a robust band, embrace the vaudevillian spirit, although the "comedy" foreigner routines, pantomime bawdy and forced audience participation may try your patience.

So, too, will the simplistic foghorn of a message, which renders all authority figures heartless buffoons. Littlewood and her iconoclastic Theatre Workshop were reacting against officer-focused *Journey's End*, but haven't replaced their rich emotional experience with that of ordinary soldiers. The narrative is defiantly political, not personal.

Yet the show does offer a vital platform for the collective voices of the unheard, inspired by a BBC radio programme featuring songs from the 1917 book *Tommy's Tunes*. These seemingly artless ditties – subverted hymns and theatrical standards

with lyrics changed to reflect the true trenches experience – are employed to devastating effect.

Most memorable is the Christmas Day truce: "Stille Nacht" floating over No Man's Land to be met with lewd but heartfelt "Christmas Day in the Cookhouse". In contrast, Wendi Peters excels in chilling recruitment seduction "I'll Make a Man of You", and hip-wiggling Alice Bailey Johnson, Lauren Hood and Bleu Woodward slickly deliver Lynne Page's authentic choreography, pasted-on smiles belying the carnage.

This dogmatic drama now functions as primer rather

than call to arms, but its use of song and dance – entertainment dissembling, revealing and finally moving – brilliantly conveys war's human cost, and the spirit that outlives it. ●

