

# POILU AND TOMMY

Suggested Exercises for the Classroom

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## POILU AND TOMMY

Poilu and Tommy is a new play by Anglo-French theatre company Théâtre Volière, commissioned by The Ledbury Poetry Festival in 2013 and produced by French association Jolly Good Show. It tells the story of two boys, one French, the other English, who find themselves sharing a troubled governess with a tragic secret. Part allegory on the cultural background to World War One, part ghost story, the show follows the boys from the seemingly bucolic country house of their childhood to a cellar in no-man's land, where they unexpectedly meet as young men caught up in the battle of the Somme.

## ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This document contains four exercises designed to meet key concepts laid out in the UK National Curriculum KS3, but will also be of interest to teachers of older students. You are welcome to use them as part of your scheme of studies, although, obviously, we would encourage you to undertake them in conjunction with seeing Poilu and Tommy. There is great scope here for cross-curricular approaches, and possible subject areas are suggested for each exercise. Source material for the exercises is provided.

'I should like to prepare. What is he good at? What does he want to do with his life? Of what does he dream?'

'Good lord. What questions. He's a nine year old boy. He likes getting dirty and hunting rats. Likes to ride, I think, but then who doesn't. I mean, there's not much to a nine year old boy, is there. Bit of a blank slate.'





## THE POEM THAT NEVER WAS

Many of the soldiers of World War One, from all walks of life and classes, read and wrote poetry when they were serving at the front. This is as true of the French as it is the British, and yet, in France, their work is now largely forgotten or is not regarded as 'war-poetry'. In the English-speaking world, however, the work of war poets such as Wilfred Owen have come to occupy a pre-eminent place in the collective memory of the conflict. It has been suggested that this is because the style of French poetry at the time, its urbanism, its modernism, was less suited to the representation of the war's horrors. How true is this? Are certain kinds of poetry better equipped or more suited than others to deal with certain subjects? To what extent does the 'accessibility' or 'inaccessibility' of a poem determine its readership?

- Read the poems *Océan de terre* by Apollinaire and *Dreamers* by Siegfried Sassoon. Teachers of French may wish to set some of the Apollinaire poem as a translation exercise.
- Discuss the differences between the poems. Which of the poems do you find most immediately effecting and why? To what extent can the Apollinaire poem be said, in the words of T.S. Eliot, to 'communicate before it is understood'?

In *Poilu* and *Tommy*, Charles and Alfred, French and English soldiers respectively, decide to write a poem together. Events conspire against them, and the poem is never written.

- Imagine what kind of poem Charles and Alfred would have written. What form would it have taken? What would have been their subject matter?
- Write a *rondel*, as in the *Pierrot Lunaire* poems by Albert Giraud (Charles' favourite poet), that might have been written by Charles and Alfred.

«Or we could just write a poem about this bottle of wine. How you wanted to drink it, and I did not.»

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## IS MY TEAM PLOUGHING?

Poilu and Tommy features the poem *Is my team ploughing...* from A.E. Housman's cycle of poems *A Shropshire Lad*. These poems were first published in 1896 but were not widely read until the Second Boer War. In WWI *A Shropshire Lad* was a bestseller. What is it about the poems that chimed with the mood of a country at war? Most of the cycle was written before Housman had even visited Shropshire; one might say that his is an idealised rural England. What does this tell us about the nature of the English and their relationship with the countryside? Is it evident in the poetry? *Is my team ploughing...* has been set to music by many composers, most notably Vaughan Williams and Gurney. Why does the work lend itself to this treatment?

- Read *Is my team ploughing...* by A.E. Housman and *As the Team's Head Brass* by Edward Thomas. It might also be useful to listen to Vaughan Williams' setting of Housman's poem, from his song cycle *On Wenlock Edge* (not included).
- Discuss the poems' differences and similarities. Which seems a more accurate representation of rural life? Do either of the poems seem to be recounting an event that actually happened? To what extent is the authorial voice present in each poem?
- Devise and present a performance of *Is my team ploughing...* Think about the relationship between the two voices in the poem. You may want to introduce the character of the 'girl', and/or have the action take place in an incongruous setting - in a waiting room, say, or a supermarket.
- Re-write *As the Team's Head Brass* as a mini-play, converting some of the non-dialogue passages in to dialogue and using others as stage directions.

«J'entonces un poème adapté, et la magie des mots va provoquer un état de transe. The verse will make the trance. And in the trance your mother will come.»

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## THE LETZEKÄPPEL

Marie-Anne, the governess in Poilu and Tommy, comes from Alsace.  
Alsace is the most easterly region of France and lies on the border with Germany.

It has been disputed territory for centuries, and, at the outbreak of WWI, Alsace and part of the neighbouring region of Lorraine were German - they had been annexed after the Prussian victory in the Franco-Prussian war of 1871. The loss of Alsace-Lorraine was a bitter blow for France, and, although not the primary reason for antagonism towards Germany prior to 1914, certainly featured prominently in the propaganda of the period.

Alsace-Lorraine was restored to the French after WWI but was annexed once again by Nazi Germany in WW2. There are many tragic stories from both wars of members of the same family fighting on opposing sides, often under duress - a sensitive issue in the region, even today. After WW2, Strasbourg, the capital city of Alsace, was chosen to host the institutions of the European Union, and as such to be the symbolic 'capital of Europe.'

- Make a group that consists of three teams: Linguists, Historians, and Performers. If this can be done with the collaboration of their respective departments within the school, so much the better. The group will be working on an interpretation of Act 2 Scene 2 of Poilu and Tommy (provided), each team bringing their specialism to bear on the text, which contains French, German and English, and is concerned with the history of Alsace.

- Linguists should work primarily on pronunciation, but could also, depending on ability, be asked to translate some of the dialogue.

- Historians should prepare a short presentation on Alsace and its place in European history. This could include discussion of the following:

In France, war memorials are generally inscribed 'morts pour la France', but in Alsace they are often dedicated 'à nos morts'. Why is this?

What was the relationship between Prussia and Germany?

The European Parliament currently divides its time between Brussels and Strasbourg. Some believe that it should be moved to Brussels only, others that its rightful place, for symbolic reasons, is in Strasbourg. What are those reasons? Does such symbolism matter?

- Performers should prepare a performance of the scene, referring to the Linguists for pronunciation and translation, and to the Historians for a deeper understanding of the text.

## PIERROT AND THE MOON

In *Poilu* and *Tommy*, Young Charles, a would-be *Poète Maudit*, identifies himself with the archetypal figure of Pierrot. Pierrot was an enormously popular figure at the fin de siècle and beyond, in a way that can be difficult for us to understand today, particularly in the UK, where clowning has been all but lost in both its vital, popular forms, and in its more ambiguous, highbrow manifestations. For the so-called 'decadent' poets of the late nineteenth century, Pierrot represented the transgressive outsider, the artist toying with madness, a macabre, carnivalesque figure who subverts the established order in order to unlock the unconscious. Which fictional figures might be seen as occupying a similar position in our current culture? Is it possible to make the *Commedia* - from which Pierrot originates - relevant, or even just entertaining, for a contemporary audience?

- Read the three poems from Albert Giraud's *Pierrot Lunaire*, in French and in their English translations. Teachers of French may like to invite their students to critique the translations. How have the translators met the challenge of translating poetry in a strict form like the *rondel*? Could their work be improved on?
- Split in to groups. Each group is to devise and then perform a short drama incorporating the three poems. You may wish to read them out as part of your presentation, or to represent the action entirely non-verbally, drawing on conventions of the *Commedia*.
- Is it possible to make this material funny? (You may wish to re-work your piece to test this). How would you describe such humour? Can you think of any examples of figures from contemporary culture who employ this kind of humour? What functions, in a psychological and/or political sense, does this kind of humour serve?

«You know, you used to give me the most ghastly dreams about that ruddy clown. I'd close my eyes and there he'd be, white face looming up out of the darkness, horrible yellow teeth, bloodshot eyes. Nothing like the Pierrots I'd seen on Brighton beach. I mean, they were just a lot of jolly fellows with ukeleles.»

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## THE POILU AND TOMMY WORKSHOP

O meet it is and passing sweet  
To live in peace with others,  
But sweeter still and far more meet,  
To die in war for brothers.

How shocking these lines, written on the eve of the First World War, seem to us now. More shocking still to learn that this naïve doggerel is the work of Wilfred Owen, whose subsequent poetry would come to represent, for the British at least, all the horror and futility of the 'war to end all wars'. He was not alone in his enthusiasm for the coming conflict. Many writers, artists and intellectuals saw a purpose in the war beyond the need to defend their country from a militant Germany: 'We want to glorify war – the world's only hygiene,' wrote F. T. Marinetti in his Futurist manifesto of 1909, and Rupert Brooke described eager volunteers as 'swimmers into cleanness leaping.'

Our workshop explores the historical and cultural background that gave rise to this response to the outbreak of World War One, the effect the reality of combat was to have on this attitude, and ways in which parallels can be drawn between the cultural situation in 1914 and the present day.

With support from native French speakers and actors, participants will be encouraged to read French and British poets of WWI and the fin de siècle, to tackle some of the challenges of translation, and to find ways of bringing their ideas to life through performance.

This workshop, available in half day and full day versions, can be booked through Jolly Good Show (details below).

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## BOOKING A WORKSHOP

The Poilu and Tommy workshop is led by two French actors and two English actors from the show.

The workshop is designed for a maximum of 30 participants.

Prices: Half-day Workshop £275, Full-day Workshop £500

Please contact:  
Natasha Wood

[jollygoodshow@hotmail.fr](mailto:jollygoodshow@hotmail.fr)

## BOOKING TICKETS FOR THE SHOW

Poilu and Tommy will be playing at the Courtyard Theatre, Shoreditch, London ([www.thecourtyard.org.uk](http://www.thecourtyard.org.uk)) from 19th February - 8th March 2014.

For details of matinee and evening performances, and to book tickets, please email 'Ticket Enquiries' at

[tickets@thecourtyard.org.uk](mailto:tickets@thecourtyard.org.uk)

or call  
**020 7729 2202** from 3pm - 7.30pm Tues-Sun.



## JOLLY GOOD SHOW

Jolly Good Show is a French theatre association, based in Strasbourg, producing European intercultural and multi-lingual performance projects.

Visit our website at  
[www.jollygoodshow.fr](http://www.jollygoodshow.fr) to learn more about our work.

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