

THE WIPERS TIMES
POST SHOW TALK, OXFORD PLAYHOUSE
TUESDAY 19TH SEPTEMBER 2017

Host: Thank you very much for seeing the show this evening and staying. I'm sure you know by now that we have our wonderful writers here this evening to talk and answer any questions you might have. So, please take this opportunity to think of very witty and insightful things *[audience laughter]*. Without further ado I'll introduce our lovely writers Mr Nick Newman and Mr Ian Hislop.

Host: Right, so I think the best place to start will be at the beginning with how *The Wipers Times* came about.

Nick Newman: Well, it started a very long time ago. About fifteen years ago Ian was doing a documentary for Radio 4. He came across this trench newspaper which neither of us had heard about at all. It had sort of passed into obscurity, having had a brief flash of fame in 1918 and thereafter.

Ian Hislop: I was working on one of the documentaries in which the commissioner said- "oh yes, your documentaries, you make documentaries about dead people, recounted by old people" *[audience laughter]*.

In this documentary I found the story of *The Wipers Times* and I genuinely found this paper incredible funny. I gave it to Nick and said this is too good to leave as a documentary, we could steal all these jokes and play them as ours *[audience laughter]*. From then on we tried to sell this project.

Nick Newman: It did take us a very long time- about ten years of banging on doors. We went to various producers who said nobody is interested in the First World War. But, gradually there was things like War Horse, BirdSong and the/

Ian Hislop: This anniversary went by. Essentially Nick had this idea that somewhere between 1914 and 1918 someone must have laughed. Because if you see the standard presentation of the First World War people literally just look out the window with a small tear. That's it. And we didn't believe it. We thought that doesn't sound likely from our own experience of being alive. When I saw *The Wipers Times* I thought 'my god, this is not history refracted through a peace of the 1920s or the disillusionment of the 30s. This is Thursday afternoon in 1917 and they laughed, they genuinely laughed!' It was a defence mechanism, it was an act of resistance and that's what inspired us.

Nick Newman: What was so startling to us was that they were making jokes not really about the Germans at all but about their high command. It was very surprisingly subversive.

Host: And about themselves as well. There's a lot of the soldiers experience in the pieces. There's some really good serious writing as well.

Ian Hislop: Yes, I mean, the poetry. We took some of the poetry written by other ranks but it wasn't all public schoolboys writing poetry in Latin. Other ranks wrote poetry, it's rougher and it's readier, but I think it's equally moving. You get a feeling of what it was like to be there in a way you don't, I think, years later, when it's more refined. That seemed to me to be the authentic voice of the trenches.

Host: Am I right in thinking that lots of what Roberts says in the final scene to the editor is taken from an introduction to a collective version of the papers? I think it was printed in 1931. And that was exactly the time when *Goodbye to All That, All Quiet on the Western Front* and/

Ian Hislop: And a lot of Brooke's poetry comes much later, Siegfried Sassoon, even Wilfred Owen.

Nick Newman: That stream of sub consciousness where he says 'you'd like me to write this kind of piece how it is not all quiet on the Western Front etc. and shoot Hargrave for cowardice. All that is Roberts own words and it spews out onto the pages.

Ian Hislop: A lot of the best stuff you related to was put in straight. And that is partly the pleasure of the exercise. We could turn their words into a production that has toured round the country. And hearing you laugh at their jokes is fantastically satisfying. Because it was black, and it was funny. And it's not patronising. It's not saying 'this is old-time humour'. I mean, they hated the Daily Mail. We couldn't try to keep those jokes out. People say, oh typical, they try to put in these jokes. They were their jokes. William was a real *bête noire* for them- he wrote complete balls from the front. On his deathbed he apologised. His newspaper didn't. Funny that.

Host: It's interesting that he did become quite het up and sort of stopped talking about the paper after a while. The experiences that were fed back to the Homefront were so different to what was going on in the trenches. I think he and millions of others thought...well...nobody has any frame of reference.

Ian Hislop: There were a million casualties but four million people in khaki came home. That's a huge number of people. And they came home to find the country wasn't really very interested in what they had to say. They didn't have jobs, a lot of them had gone to women, a lot of them had been replaced. That joke that you are an army of occupation or you're an army of no occupation- that's their joke. They knew that in 1918, in that issue. They knew what was coming up in the 20s and 30s- that's what's so brilliant about the two of them as writers.

Nick Newman: The thing that always baffled us was that they came home and were engineers. They should have been made editors of *Punch*, but instead they just disappeared from the radar.

Ian Hislop: And *Punch* could have done with some jokes!

Host: Shall we open it up to questions?

Audience Member: How many copies of *The Wipers Times* do you have in your possession?

Nick Newman: There were 23 that were actually published and luckily for us they have survived and been stored.

Audience Member: So, where are they stored?

Ian Hislop: There's one in the National Army Museum and the Sherwood Foresters have a set. I have one, which was sent to me by an old lady...she found it in her attic and it was still covered in mud. I didn't tell her what it was worth- I kept it. They do occasionally come up for auction but they are incredibly valuable now.

Nick Newman: One of the amazing things about it is that, even at the time, they sort of had a sense that it might be valuable in the future. We came across this item from March 1916 after the very first issue was published and it was a letter from our printer back home. It was published in the Nottinghamshire Paper and it said 'Dear Mum and Dad, I found this printing press and we got it going and then the officers came and took over and decided to produce this newspaper'. The final bit said 'if a copy should end up back on the home front please keep it and look after it because one day it might be worth something.' Even after the first issue they knew how good they were.

Ian Hislop: And I think that's brilliant thing. Because they were that good, and to know it- there were other trench newspapers but there was nothing like them.

Host: We met some of the families of the men who had all been to see it at various points. Roberts' grandson and some of his siblings brought with them some copies that they still have of the paper. The thing that I found remarkable was the quality of it. The quality of the paper they had got hold of and of the printing.

Nick Newman: I think that's what elevated it above all other trench newspapers. There were quite a few trench newspapers all over. It was the quality of the production that was first-class.

Ian Hislop: The response of the relatives has been fabulous. We met Pearson's granddaughter and we said, what were your memories of your grandfather? She said, well, I asked him once what he did in the war and he said 'well, I had very long legs so I ran away!' This is Pearson, he DSO'd twice and MC, you wouldn't find a braver officer. But nope, he told her he'd ran for it.

Nick Newman: One thing I was interested in about you as an actor, what is it like meeting these relatives and playing their ancestors?

Host: Well, it's a curious thing, I don't know really. I feel like I've gotten to know Jack quite well and I really like him. *[Laughs]* I feel like we're quite close. I think all of their voices are quite authentic in the play, and we managed to get hold of a bit of writing that was his, I think after the war he wrote a short memoir about what it was like. Lots of jokes about drinking whiskey/

Ian Hislop: There was just one moment...when you're a writer and you produce the work and somebody says 'oh, we've got a small piece of his writing' you think 'oh god- we're going to find out we've got the wrong person!'

Anyway, Pearson wrote a ten page document. The first nine pages were about fortifications around Ypres- he was an engineer, like my father in fact, and...uh...he was pretty dull. The last two pages are about *The Wipers Times*. It's fabulous...at one point he says literally...you could not walk down the road, it was too dangerous. And the friend I always chose was Johnny Walker. He wrote that line in the end and we thought, thank god, this is the bloke we thought you were.

The same with Roberts. The more we found out about them, the more we liked them.

Nick Newman: There's a terrific vein of self-deprecation running all the way through it. It was their way of dealing with the horrors around them, to belittle them. So when Pearson is writing about the Ypres Salient in 1917 and he said we'd return there, he said it was still a 'jolly warm place to be'. That's his description of this place, that it is flattened and full of dead bodies. That's what they did.

Ian Hislop: Oh yeah, because we both write for Private Eye and once a year, for Christmas, we create fake advertisements. We thought this was very original until we found out that they'd done it and much better, I have to say. However bad taste the Eye is, we never hit their level. They were testing themselves- saying, we will not be coward, we will not be scared by any of this. Those reviews they did...the first fake musical they did was called 'Over the Top' and they put a review underneath saying 'it's a gas'. It's that extraordinary level of bravery; someone defined it as 'defiant flippancy' which I loved.

Audience Member: I loved every moment of it I do congratulate you! Would it have been different if *Oh! What a Lovely War* had never been done?

Ian Hislop: Well I think *Oh! What a Lovely War* was very sixties. I think it's a film about Vietnam. I think it's written by a particular generation at a particular time. Obviously when we were younger we loved it, we thought it was great. But the source material is *The Wipers Times*. And that I think is the difference. It's like *Black Adder*, which I think is a fantastically funny take on the war. But it's a take from now to then. *Oh! What a Lovely War* is from the sixties to then. *Goodbye to all that* is from the thirties, to then. This is then, to then. And I think they were unrecognised, they were funnier than all of those people at the time.

Audience Member: Were there any similar publications from the Second World War?

Nick Newman: I haven't seen it. I come from a military background and I'm very aware that every squadron and unit have their own version of *The Wipers Times*. But they are not quite as subversive of *The Wipers Times*.

Audience Member: Do you think it was the conditions of the First World War?

Ian Hislop: Yeah, I think it was more acceptable and more surprising. For example, the radio programmes in the Second World War, which is exactly the same comic tradition, are attacks on the ministry, the navy lark, it's how useless we are. There's barely any mention of the Germans from the Second World War, and it's exactly the same in the First World War, we're interested in attacking ourselves.

I mean, Nick's family, both his Dad and his brother...he was at Oxford and he was a cartoonist, a very funny man...had that sense of the military undermining themselves. This is a small anecdote, but, during the Iraq war, when the British contingent had to scuttle to the airport and run for it, we ran a poem called *Out of the Valley of Death came the six thousand*. I was in Charing Cross and a man in uniform came up to me and asked, 'did you write that poem?'I said we had and he said 'funniest thing any of us had ever seen'. He was there and he thought it was funny. You should never be offended on behalf of people who have more guts than you.

Audience Member: Do you think the Germans were aware of *The Wipers Times*?

Nick Newman: I'm not aware of it.

Audience Member: What do you think they would have thought of it?

Ian Hislop: There was an Italian trench newspaper which was beautifully drawn but came from the propaganda unit, there was a French trench newspaper that was angst ridden and philosophical, and there was one German newspaper that was sort of Bavarian humour.

Host: There were a lot of cartoons in it, but they weren't cartoons like the ones that Bruce Bairnsfather at the time was producing. Bruce Bairnsfather's came up with this character called Old Bill. It sort of took Britain by storm but the German ones just weren't....I think anybody could understand the old Bill cartoons...but the German ones are just baffling.

Ian Hislop: Well, I think anybody British could because they are just complaints about food and conditions. Nick found this brilliant cartoon of a man sitting there with a bottle of whiskey and a missile comes and takes a friend's head off but leaves the bottle of whiskey. The caption says 'That was close!' Lots of people in the trenches did have a sense of humour. What baffles us is that no literature of the time, or even subsequent books...I've just been reading Pat Barker and nobody smiles in a Pat Barker book.

Ian Hislop: We eventually sold this after warhorse- we said we have this brilliant new take on the First World War. There aren't any horses but there are jokes. Nobody says, 'oh joey!' but we have humans...and this was novel.

Host: I think we've probably got time for one more question.

Audience Member: I'm interested in finding out about the senior staff... surely if the senior staff really wanted to clamp down on it, they could have suppressed it and nothing would have happened.

Nick Newman: I think the point of it was...it raised morale. They were referred to as Lenin and Trotsky.

Ian Hislop: This was in 1917. These two British Officers, those were their real names.

All the early editions had to go to the official censor but there was clearly a faction that was not keen on this newspaper and a faction that thought this was exactly what was needed.

Nothing good in this play we have made up.

Nick Newman: We were very lucky to come across Roberts' own memoir. He rather skates over the First World War, doesn't mention *The Wipers Times* at all.

Ian Hislop: This is an unfinished memoir. His aunt had it in an attic and gave it to us on typed sheets;

Nick Newman: All these little incidents like Madam Fifi, he came back from leave and did order that everyone in the division should go for one day's leave and see the sights, all that's true. We've tried to keep it true to their experience.

Host: There must have been people in the high command who thought, these men need something! All of it must have been born out of that sense of surprise from this conflict which sort of...rose up...Lots of ordinary men were in this situation that was totally unknown in the history of warfare and was stretching along in a way that it wasn't meant to.

Nick Newman: When they arrive, Roberts, he couldn't get onto the boat in South Africa when he heard the war had broken out, and it was just a jolly adventure, and he suddenly realises it was the greatest disaster to befall mankind as he says./

Ian Hislop: We were trying to get that mixture. Too much of that literature was by Public Schoolboys who were very shocked. They said 'gosh it's noisy here'. Well, not compared to a steel foundry it isn't! 'It's quite dirty here', not really, not compared to most of the lives of people that are serving. I did another documentary in Wales about whether people working in the mines wanted to join up- they couldn't get out of the mines fast enough! You have to remember, it's not a period piece, it's not Downton.