

“The Hired Man”

Hull Truck Theatre (main stage) 26-30th April, 2016

Director: Martin Beaumont

Musical Director: Chris Maynard

“I’ve long felt that this musical is easily the best British-created musical of the last thirty years (and yes, I include *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Miserables*), and it never fails to resonate.”
Mark Shenton, The Stage.

Show outline

When it first transferred to the West End, ‘The Hired Man’ was dubbed “The British Les Mis” by the press for its dramatic, powerful and soaring score. It is an epic musical love story about the heroic lives of ordinary, working-class northerners at the turn of the century. The show is based on Melvyn Bragg’s novel about his father’s life. There is humour in the show at times, but the main thrust of the story is drama. Earthy, gutsy and honest are words that come to mind.

The show suits performers who are strong, natural actors who can deliver honest, passionate performances. Heartfelt, robust singing is a requirement. Though the show focuses on the relationship of John and Emily (and their family) – their story is echoed in the theme of a community overcoming hardships and great society upheavals. The chorus are therefore an integral part of the show carrying the thrust of many of the songs: songs about the struggles of finding employment, celebrating life, the hardship of work, the separation and horrors of war, communities healing and overcoming tragedy.

There is little movement/dance to speak of. The show is set in working-class Cumbria. Region specific accents are not essential, though a ‘northern’ (rather than RP) sound is preferable.

Character Outlines

Lead Characters

John: (Playing age early 20s to early 40s). John starts the show as a young, earnest man starting out on married life and forging a home. He is hard-working, ordinary and principled. He loves working the land but is somewhat too dedicated to being the bread-winner in order to raise his family and struggles to speak his love. He is initially oblivious to the fact that in his absence his wife’s head is turned, but reacts passionately when he discovers them. For better pay he makes the sacrifice of turning to a career in the mines, and then serves his time in the Great War. After losing his wife he returns to the farm life that he holds close to his heart.

Emily: (John’s wife) (Playing age early 20s to early 40s). Emily starts the show full of enthusiasm and optimism for starting married life in a new home. Home life becomes dissatisfying whilst her husband works the land, and, though she is sensible and level-headed, her head is eventually turned towards ‘Jackson’ despite her attempts to resist him. She ultimately decides against taking their

relationship any further and carries guilt about her brief indiscretion. She works hard to raise two children but struggles to overcome her grief when her son is killed in the War. She and her husband reconcile their feelings for each other and she becomes ill with tuberculosis and dies peacefully.

Supporting characters:

Isaac (John's brother): A life loving, free-spirited, exuberant joker. Encourages John to let his hair down and spend more time away from home in pursuit of sport. He loses his leg during the fighting of World War I.

Seth (John's brother): Hard-working and more serious. As a mine worker he leads the drive for Union representation to protect the lives of his fellow miners and improve working conditions.

Jackson: Handsome and charismatic – the village 'catch'. Is attracted to Emily and they have an affair. Son of Pennington, He is killed in battle.

May (John & Emily's daughter): Appears in Act 2. (nearly 16 – when we first see her, early 20s at the end of the show). Joyful, confident, big feeling.

Harry (John & Emily's son) Appears in Act 2. (17) strong willed. Against his fathers' wishes he takes a job in the mines and enlists for the War before he is of age so that he can 'do his bit'. He is killed in battle.

Sally (Emily's friend): aged 17 at the top of the show. Late 30s by the end. Humorous and characterful.

Minor roles

Pennington – A farm owner who employs John. Father of Jackson. No solo singing (but sings in chorus)

Blacklock, Bob, Dan etc: Minor characters in the ensemble with solo singing.

Song List

ACT 1

"Song Of the Hired Man"	Full Company
"Fill It To the Top"	Isaac, Seth, John, Chorus
"Now For The First Time"	Emily and John
"Hired Man Reprise"	Company
"Work"	Full Company
"Who Will You Marry Then"	Sally, Emily
"Get Up And Go Lad"	Isaac, John, Chorus
"I Wouldn't Be The First"	Emily, Jackson
"Fade Away"	John, Emily
"Hear Your Voice"	Jackson
"What a Fool I've Been"	John
"If I Could"	Emily with John & Jackson
"Hired Man Reprise"	Company

ACT 2

"You Never See The Sun"	May
"What Would You Say to Your Son"	John
"Union Song"	Seth, Blacklock and Chorus
"Farewell Song"	Emily, John, Isaac, May, Chorus

“War/So Tell Your Children”	Emily, John, Isaac, Jackson, Seth, Male Chorus
“Day Follows Day”	Emily, Female Chorus
“Crossbridge Dance”	Isaac, Full Company
“No Choir Of Angels”	Emily & John
“Hear Your Voice”	Jackson & Emily
“Re-Hiring: Song of the Hired Man”	Full Company

Synopsis

As the show starts it is 1898. John Tallentire, a newly married man is taking part in a hiring fair, which were held bi-annually. Men and women travelled for miles to be “hired on” by a landowner, to undertake farm work; labourers and farmers bargain over wages (**‘Song Of The Hired Men’**).

John meets his two brothers, Isaac and Seth. Seth works down the coal mines, Isaac avoids work when he can. The three brothers adjourn to the pub (**‘Fill it To The Top’**). John has taken a job as a farm labourer in nearby Crossbridge. His wife, Emily, who is pregnant, joins him and they reflect with excitement on the new life they are starting out on together (**‘Now For The First Time’**).

A keen betting man, Isaac issues a general challenge to a wrestling match. Jackson Pennington, son of the farmer who has just offered the “luck penny” (a shilling, their only form of contract) and hired John, accepts the challenge. He is defeated, but Emily at least has obviously been impressed. At Crossbridge the male and female labourers work the hard ground (**‘Work Song/It’s All Right For You’**).

John is absorbed and fulfilled by his work but Emily, who has given birth to a daughter, May, tells her new-found friend Sally she is growing dissatisfied with her life at home whilst John works the land (**‘Who Will You Marry Then’**). Jackson approaches. Sally is under his spell, but it is Emily that Jackson wants. With Emily’s agreement, Isaac persuades John to go fox-hunting with him (**‘Get Up And Go, Lad’**).

John decides to stay away for the night. It is Jackson who delivers the message to Emily. The temptation is too much for her (**‘I Wouldn’t Be The First’**). The next day John returns. The distance between the married couple is growing (**‘Fade Away’**). Abandoning hope of getting Emily for himself alone, Jackson joins the army, hoping to go to India. As he is saying farewell to his old cronies at the pub he receives a whispered message from Joe Sharpe. He waits outside the pub (**‘Hear Your Voice’**).

We find out who the message was from when Emily arrives. She is distraught at him leaving without telling her. Inside the pub the men are gossiping and John suddenly realises what has been going on (**‘What a Fool I’ve Been’**). He catches his wife with Jackson. There is a fight, and Jackson is beaten, while Emily stands by torn between the two men (**‘If I Could’**).

For Act Two the year shifts forward to 1914. John and Emily are still together and have had another child, this time a son called Harry. They have moved to Whitehaven where John has left farming and joined his brother down the pit. As the Act starts May, now sixteen, is on a summer day out, on a hill overlooking the village of Crossbridge with her younger brother. Harry runs off, excited by the sound of a gun firing. May removes some of her clothing and luxuriates in the sunshine (**‘You Never See the Sun’**). Jackson enters with a gun. He is home on leave and has been doing some shooting. He asks wistfully after Emily.

Back at Whitehaven Emily has taken a job in a factory, which doesn’t please her

husband. Harry wants to go down the pit like his father, but Emily will not hear of it. It turns out headstrong Harry has gone behind his parents' backs and signed on at the mine anyway (**'What Would You Say To Your Son?'**). Seth is now a force in the miners' union. He is trying to get all the men to join, but some are opposed. The meeting ends in a fight (**'Union Song'**).

The great War descends on the family, ripping them apart (**'Farewell Song'**) as first John, Seth, their other brother Isaac and then Harry (who is still under-age) sign up to go to fight in France. The patriotic soldiers soon discover the grim realities of trench warfare (**'War Song/So Tell Your Children'**). The Tallentires, like most families, are not spared the tragedy and horror of those four years. Isaac loses a leg, and both Jackson and Harry are killed.

The war over, we move forward to 1920. Isaac is now married. Seth has become a pacifist. For old times' sake, John and Emily return to Crossbridge for an outing to the Friendly Society Annual Day (**'Day Follows Day'**). Emily, who is not well now, having developed tuberculosis, suggests that they should return to the land. Both have regrets over what has happened in the past but their love has survived (**'No Choir of Angels'**).

Some time later, in a pit accident John and two friends are cut off by a roof fall. As Emily anxiously waits for news at home she reflects on her life and her loved ones in her dying moments (**'Hear Your Voice'**). Seth and the others succeed in their rescue attempt, but John returns home to find that a final tragedy has descended on the family. Finally he makes up his mind to do as Emily wanted and return to the land. The story ends as it began, with John seeking work as a hired man (**Song of The Hired Man**).