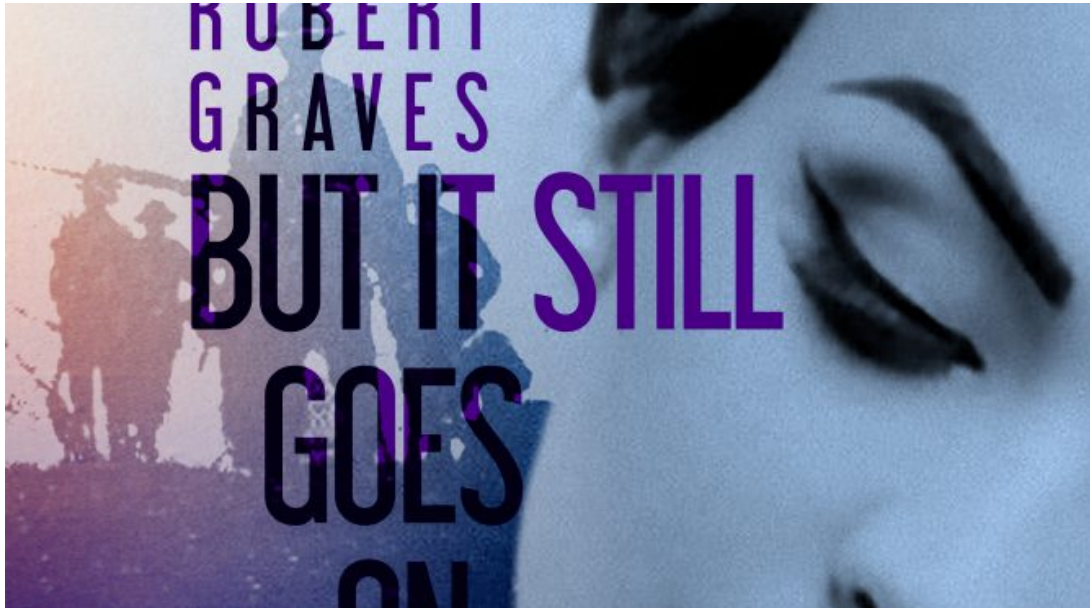


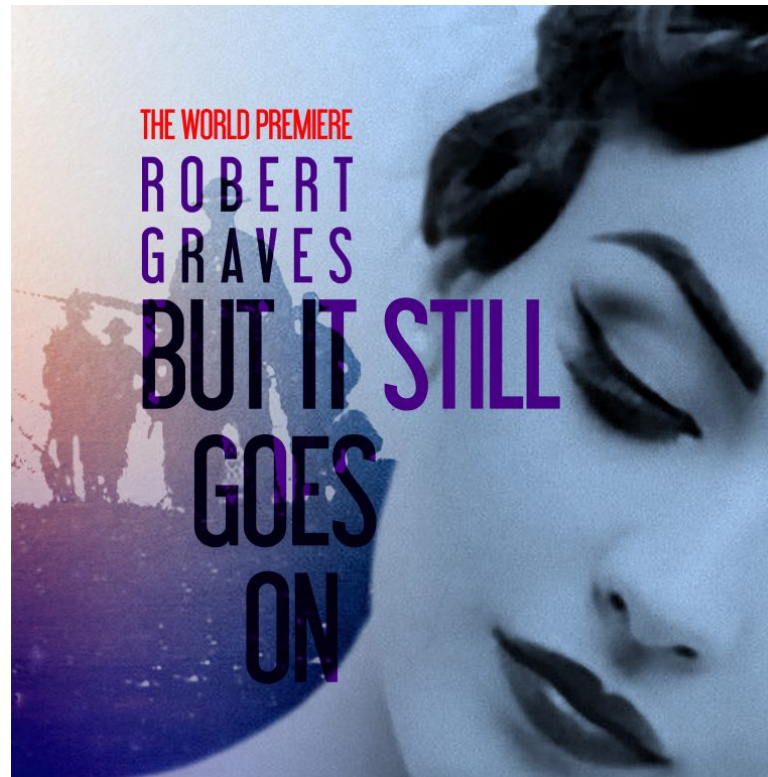
BEYOND THE TRENCHES



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“BANGING THE DOOR ON THE WAR”: RE-VISITING ROBERT GRAVES BUT IT STILL GOES ON AND THE POST-WAR PLAYS OF THE 1920S

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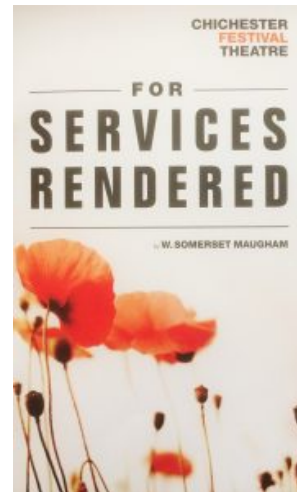


But It Still Goes On, 2018. With thanks to Arsalan Sattari

As Robert Graves' forgotten 1929 play *But It Still Goes ON* receives its world-premiere in London, Andrew Maunder wonders if it is time to revisit the post-war plays of the 1920s. This latest Blog post explores this fascinating world.

The ink on the Versailles peace treaty of 1919 was barely dry before theatre's contribution to the conflict began to be questioned. In his Preface to *Heartbreak House* (1919), George Bernard Shaw wrote of the 'childish antics' of the wartime entertainment industry, labelling its output shallow and meaningless. The "higher drama" had been 'put out of action' by theatre managers whose aim was to "exploit" the "hyperaesthesia" of soldiers on leave; "smiling men" who because they "were no longer under fire" were ready to be pleased by anything.

In contrast, plays about the war which emerge after 1919 are invariably characterized by their sense of grief; they are often angry; they also emphasize the war's lasting and destructive legacy. In 1919 one critic wondered if it was time to "bang the door on the war" [i.e. forget it] but the post-war playwrights, like their poet counterparts, had no intention of doing so. As "plays with a purpose", plays written in the decade or so after 1919 tend to be notable for their accusatory tone and their tendency to conclude with the message that such things must never happen again. "Every moment we see the countries of Europe arming themselves to the teeth as hard as they can go and that is why I wrote my play", explained W. Somerset Maugham, defending *For Services Rendered* (1932; revived at Chichester Festival Theatre in 2015) against charges of negativity, "to try and protect the new youth of today from dying in the trenches or losing five years of their lives in a war that seems almost imminent". Theatre needed to be used, Maugham argued, to make audiences reflect on what had been won, but also on what had been lost.



For Services Rendered, 2015. Acknowledgement – Chichester Festival Theatre.

Some of these 1920s plays are very much with us, of course. R.C. Sherriff created what has long been the most successful post-war play, *Journey's End* in 1928. The play ran for 594 performances in the West End, 485 on Broadway, was a world-wide hit, including in Berlin, and was also made into a successful film in 1930 – and in 2017.

R.C. Sherriff was not the only ex-serviceman to try his hand at playwriting. Robert Graves (1895-1985)

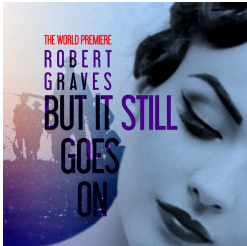


Robert Graves. With kind permission of the Robert Graves Estate

who enlisted at the outbreak of the war, aged 19, and served as a Captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers was asked by Maurice Browne, producer of *Journey's End* to write something similar. Graves' memoir *Good-Bye to All That* had just been published and to Browne he seemed a good bet. Graves duly obliged, the result being the intriguingly titled *But It Still Goes On*. It was, he later wrote “a tactful reshuffling of actual events and situations in which I had been more or less closely involved.” It horrified Maurice Browne who refused to stage it. His pretext was that, if staged, the play would do “infinite harm” to Graves' and “prejudice your public against your future work.” In reality he was worried that its themes of adultery, not to mention its discussion of homosexuality amongst soldiers, would prove too shocking for London audiences who were, he decided, not ready for such things.

Looking at the play now, it is easy to see why Browne would have been worried. Graves' play is set a decade after the armistice but the war still casts its shadow. Cecil Tompion, a popular writer bullies his children as he always has done; his venality and complacency are striking. But his son, an ex-army officer who survived the trenches of the Western Front, and his daughter, a doctor, suddenly try to break free. Their lives are touched by another ex-soldier, David (supposedly based on Siegfried Sassoon), and close friend Charlotte, who both desperately struggle to repress their homosexuality. The former seeks out male prostitutes. The play is thus a long way from the polite regret of *Journey's End* although it is like other post-war in its bitter tone particularly the sense that the younger generation have been duped by their elders and that what they fought for is worth nothing. Graves once wrote that he “admire[d] anger in people. It means real sensibility...the power of anger is a tribute to an uncrushed spirit”. *But It Still Goes On* embodies his sentiments. The play was “banging the door” on the war but not as means of closing it – as critics had predicted – but as a way of making a noise.

Although the play has never been staged – no other producer would touch it in 1929 – it is finally getting its world premiere at The Finborough Theatre in London in July as part of their Great War 100 season.



But It Still Goes On, 2018.
With thanks to Arsalan
Sattari

It is being produced as part of a project involving members of the Centre for Everyday Lives in War, part of their interest in rediscovering “lost” plays and also as part of a move to think about post-war experiences. How was the war represented in the fifteen years following the 1918 armistice? In *But It Still Goes On*, Graves' diatribes against the false values of the post-war world seem fairly typical examples of how writers of the 1920s and 1930s drifted away from celebrating deeds of derring-do towards showing new dystopias of wrecked lives. Alongside better known playwrights like Somerset Maugham and also Noel Coward, whose *Postmortem* (1930) showed another an alternative version of the post-war, devoid of spiritual and moral values, Graves' protagonists live lives of repression and are scarred – even haunted – by their wartime experiences. It all seemed very “modern” and shocking in 1929 but it will be interesting to see how audiences of 2018 brought up on the cricket field gallantry of the ever-present *Journey's End* respond.

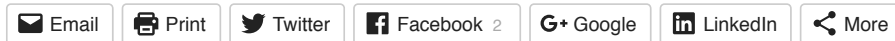


Robert Graves. With kind permission of the Robert Graves Estate

But It Still Goes On runs at the Finborough Theatre <https://www.finboroughtheatre.co.uk/> from 11 July – 4 August.

Andrew Maunder is a historian of First World War theatre and culture. He works at the University of Hertfordshire and is Co-Investigator of the Arts & Humanities Research Council Funded WW1 Engagement Centre 'Everyday Lives in War'.

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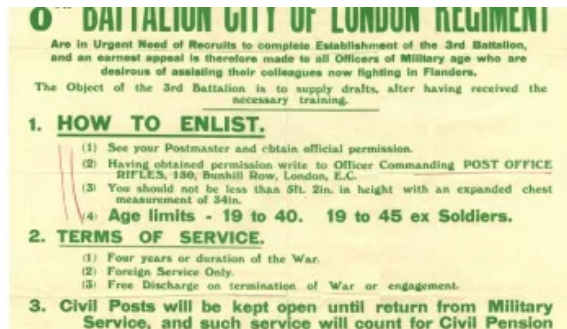
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