



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 9 November 2018

Journey's End

Director: Saul Dibb

Producers: Simon Reade and Guy de Beaujeu

Screenplay: Simon Reade (screenplay), R.C. Sherriff (play)

Starring: Paul Bettany, Asa Butterfield, Sam Claflin, Toby Jones, Tom Sturridge, Stephen Graham

This modern film adaptation of the play, written in 1928 by R.C. Sherriff, is gritty, brutal in places, and very much true to the original feel and message that Sherriff aimed to convey. Written ten years after the Armistice, *Journey's End* was not an anti-war play; it simply related Sherriff's experiences as he witnessed them. Throughout his service he corresponded almost daily with his parents and his letters are filled with a desperate yearning for a safe return to his loving family. Censorship and a desire not to disturb his parents too much prevented him from writing the unvarnished truth. Sherriff drew extensively on his letters when writing his unpublished war memoirs, which inspired him to write *Journey's End*. This new film captures both the horror and trauma of the trenches, as well as the humour and comradeship.

Genius casting for the film sees Paul Bettany as the supportive Lieutenant Osborne ('Uncle'), Sam Claflin as war weary Captain Stanhope, Asa Butterfield as newly posted officer, Raleigh, Toby Jones as soldier-cook, Mason, Stephen Graham as mild-mannered Second Lieutenant Trotter, and Tom Sturridge as hard-drinking Second Lieutenant Hibbert.

Central to the making of the film has been Fluidity Films' work with, and support of, Combat Stress, the charity that cares for veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In the play and film, Stanhope suffers from (undiagnosed) PTSD or 'shell shock' and Hibbert hides his trauma behind alcohol. Sherriff would have empathized – as a result of the constant noise of bombardment in the trenches, he himself suffered from what at the time was diagnosed as 'neuralgia'. In his letters home Sherriff writes about these traumatic conditions and his shredded nerves.



The Man Behind *Journey's End*

by Roland Wales

The new *Journey's End* movie is the first big screen adaptation of R C Sherriff's classic World War I drama for nearly ninety years, but it grips the audience every bit as firmly as the play did when it burst onto the London stage in 1928. The performances are uniformly excellent and the hyper-realism of the cinematography embeds us with the unfortunate soldiers in their few yards of dirt and mud awaiting the impending German attack.

It was for its realism that the play was first lauded by the critics all those years ago: every man in the audience 'who had ever inhabited a dugout on the Western front,' wrote Bill Darlington of *The Telegraph*, 'must have felt almost intolerably moved as the once familiar atmosphere stung his throat.'

The play drew heavily on the First World War experiences of its author. Born in 1896, Sherriff was working as an insurance clerk when war broke out, but immediately applied for a commission. Although initially rebuffed, he eventually joined the Artists' Rifles, and was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the East Surreys in September 1916. A few weeks later he arrived in France, and within two weeks was in the front line.

Although he was keen to do his duty, he was a sensitive soul ('too imaginative', he thought), and suffered dreadfully with his nerves while in France, as we know from the numerous letters he sent back to his parents. He was briefly invalided with

neuralgia a couple of times, but he stuck it out for ten months before being wounded in the early days of the third battle of Ypres in August 1917. He was sent back to England (never to return to France), and almost as soon as he could pick up a pencil he started to write about his wartime experiences, first in an unfinished novel, and then in a longer Memoir. Demobbed in 1919, he put them in his bottom drawer while he returned to his job at Sun Insurance, while writing plays for local theatre clubs in the evening.

About ten years after his wounding at Ypres he began to write a play about hero worship, setting it in the trenches which he had convincingly recreated in his Memoir: 'Dialogue came easily,' he noted later, '...and the characters walked in without invitation. I had known them all so well in the trenches that the play was an open house for them.' Various of his former comrades could lay claim to having been the models for some of the characters but there is little doubt that Raleigh and Hibbert are drawn in large part from Sherriff's own experiences - in some cases word-for-word from his recollections.

The success of *Journey's End* led to a screenwriting career that would keep him in the public eye to the 1960s, making his name a byword for quality. His friend James Whale, who had directed *Journey's End*, invited him to work for Universal Studios in Hollywood (where Whale had just made *Frankenstein*), and together they had a huge success with *The Invisible Man* (1934). After that his scriptwriting was in great demand and despite tussles with the censors (and with the Nazis), he was able to write movies as memorable as *Goodbye Mr Chips* (1939), *The Four Feathers* (1939), *Lady Hamilton* (1941 - reputedly Churchill's favourite movie), *Odd Man Out* (with Carol Reed in 1947) and many others, including his most famous - *The Dam Busters* (1955), in which, according to one astute critic, he found 'the right dramatic dialogue for the men of 1939-45, as well as those of 1914-1918'.

Roland Wales

Author of the new RC Sherriff biography:
From Journey's End to the Dam Busters: The Life of R.C. Sherriff, Playwright of the Trenches (2016, Pen & Sword)

Visit The Bookmark in Stockbridge High Street to order a copy of this book.

Further information on RC Sherriff

Surrey writer Robert Cedric Sherriff (1896-1975) is famous throughout the world for *Journey's End*, the greatest play in the English language to explore the experience of serving on the Western Front. In 2013 Surrey Heritage was awarded a Heritage Lottery Fund grant for a First World War commemoration project entitled 'To Journey's End and Beyond: the life and legacy of R C Sherriff' to celebrate Sherriff's career and cultural impact, focusing in particular on his iconic drama, the action of which is set in a British dugout on the eve of the great German offensive of March 1918.

Surrey History Centre in Woking holds Sherriff's papers: nearly 150 boxes of letters, scripts, newspaper cuttings and other material which shed light not only on the writing and impact of *Journey's End*, but also on Sherriff's early life as a schoolboy and insurance clerk, and his later successful literary career as a playwright, novelist and screenplay writer for the American and British film industries. Sherriff was at one time the highest paid British scriptwriter in Hollywood.

Letters in the collection from this period abound with famous names. The SHC project has enabled these papers to be sorted, catalogued and interpreted to enhance the understanding and appreciation of Sherriff as a man and literary personality.



RC Sherriff as an Artists Rifles cadet, c.1916

Journey's End has been a constant feature of the National Curriculum and we hope that this film will encourage more people to discover more about R,C, Sherriff. We will be showing the film to Test Valley School Year 9 later this month as part of the nationwide annual **Into Film Festival 2018.**