

MEDIA RELEASE

Soulpepper presents Oh What a Lovely War

Toronto, ON – February 9, 2010 – **Albert Schultz**, Founding Artistic Director of Soulpepper Theatre Company, today announced that the company's production of *Oh What a Lovely War* will run March 11 – April 10, 2010, at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts.

Featuring the songs that provided a soundtrack to the loss of millions of young lives during the First World War, *Oh What a Lovely War* celebrates the spirit of a generation while skewering the absurdity and futility of war. "Pack up your troubles in the old kitbag... It's a long way to Tipperary... Keep the home fires burning..."

This satiric British anti-war musical created by **Joan Littlewood**, Theatre Workshop and **Charles Chilton**, was first presented in 1963 and was adapted into a film, *Oh! What a Lovely War*, which premiered in 1969 and was revived in 1998 for a national tour, following a 35-year hiatus.

"*Oh What a Lovely War* is an intricate and multi-layered ensemble piece featuring several signature company artists, including **Michael Hanrahan** and **Oliver Dennis**, as well as introducing the members of the 2009-2010 Soulpepper Academy to our audiences," said Schultz. "These eight remarkable young artists bring tremendous energy, originality and a diverse musicality to their work."

Albert Schultz directs *Oh What a Lovely War* with musical direction by **Marek Norman**, and an ensemble cast featuring Oliver Dennis, **Ryan Field**, and Founding Member Michael Hanrahan. Making their Soulpepper debut are **Alison Jutzi**, **George Masswohl**, **Doug Price**, and Soulpepper Academy members **Ins Choi**, **Tatjana Cornij**, **Raquel Duffy**, **Gregory Prest**, **Karen Rae**, **Jason Patrick Rothery** and **Brendan Wall**. Set design is by Academy member **Ken MacKenzie**, with costume and lighting design by Academy graduate **Lorenzo Savoini**, choreography by **Candace Jennings** and sound design by **John Lott**.

Oh What a Lovely War previews March 11, 2010, opens March 17, and runs until April 10 at the Young Centre for the Performing Arts, located at 55 Mill Street, Building 49, in the Distillery Historic District. Tickets range from \$29 – \$70 and are available by calling the Young Centre box office at 416.866.8666 or by visiting www.soulpepper.ca. \$20 tickets are available for 21-30 year-olds at www.stageplay.ca. StagePlay is sponsored by TD Bank Financial Group.

2010 Soulpepper Lead Sponsors are: Sun Life Financial, Scotiabank Group and TELUS. Soulpepper gratefully acknowledges annual operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Toronto Arts Council.

Soulpepper Theatre Company is an artist-founded, classical repertory theatre company with a three-tiered mandate: to present the world's greatest stories in vital Canadian interpretations; to train a new generation of theatre artists; and to inspire and enrich youth through mentorship and access programs.

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MEDIA CONTACT:

Sarah Mackie, Publicist

416.203.6264 x146 / sarah@soulpepper.ca

BACKGROUND NOTES

Joan Littlewood has been called "one of the bonniest fighters and most intractably cussed personalities the theatre has known." It's a little hard to believe that 'intractably cussed' part when you look at her photographs: she often sports a hat tilted at a jaunty angle and a broad, enveloping smile. She's the image of boundless joie de vivre but the more you read about her the more it's clear that her cussedness came from being a true believer. From the beginning of her life Joan identified with the poor and powerless and she was never afraid to stand up for her beliefs or pay the price for her outspokenness. When she was very young one of her teachers, perhaps in frustration, perhaps in admiration, is supposed to have said to her, "You pronounce the word 'art' the way a nun might say 'Jesus!'."

Theatre Workshop was born out of Joan's vision of making art, and out of her belief that art has to be connected to the community. "Life," she said, "is a brief walk between two periods of darkness and anything that helps to cheer that up is valuable." She loved to entertain but her intention was never mere entertainment. Her actors, some of whom came from non-theatre backgrounds, trained continuously, working with a coach in the new Laban movement system, and studying improvisation daily to keep themselves razor sharp. TW actors had to commit to ongoing refinement of their craft as well as to an itinerant, sometimes hand-to-mouth daily existence. It might be fair to say that only true believers could have flourished in the demanding environment Joan Littlewood insisted upon.

Some Theatre Workshop pieces (and *Oh, What a Lovely War* is a shining example) have a deceptively loose structure, a kind of improvisatory style, but they were born out of hard work: exhaustive research, rigorous trial-and-error in rehearsal, and perhaps above all a strong political engagement. The company struggled constantly with their finances though they did tour to Czechoslovakia, Germany and France in their lean years, where their fierce productions were always ecstatically received. They were especially influenced by German theatre, and in *Lovely War* particularly by German director Erwin Piscator, in those days the foremost proponent of epic documentary theatre. Piscator said of this form: "In lieu of private themes we had generalisation, in lieu of what was special, the typical, in lieu of accident, causality ... Reason was put on a par with Emotion, while ... fantasy was replaced by documentary reality."

Joan and company took the reality of the war as documented by Charles Chilton in *The Long, Long Trail* (among other sources), and they had the brilliant inspiration to pair it with the buoyant music of the time. The verve and emotion of the songs and the brutal facts of the conflict are given equal stage time, which is part of what makes this portrait of that doomed period so vivid. When war broke out in 1914, thousands of young men in Britain and Canada hastened to sign up, giddy with the idea of manly adventure, many lying about their age to get in, fearful they'd miss out on the "fun." Four years later an entire generation had been decimated and those who did survive were dealing with horrible disfigurement and a host of psychological problems then grouped under the heading of "shell shock."

BACKGROUND NOTES CONTINUED ...

In 1916, Field Marshall Haig wrote before the Battle of the Somme: "The nation must be taught to bear losses. No amount of skill on the part of the higher commanders, no training, however good, on the part of the officers and men ... will enable victories to be won without the sacrifice of men's lives. The nation must be prepared to see heavy casualty lists." Joan Littlewood, lifelong revolutionary, knew well who bore the brunt of those losses: the poor. Part of the thrill of this production, then and now, is that it celebrates not the high-flying heroes or the high-ranking officers, not the special ones, as Piscator would have it, but the common foot soldiers, the rank and file men the British called the tommies. Her subject matter was dark and her purpose deadly serious but as this play proves, Littlewood was no sour-spirited Puritan. "Good theatre," she said, "draws the energies out of the place where it is and gives it back as joie de vivre."

British theatrical treatments of warfare were, up to the 1960's, usually naturalistic, well-made plays full of gravitas. *Oh, What a Lovely War* broke all that decorum wide open. It's irreverent, rollicking, and full of jokes even as it looks unflinchingly at the "war to end all wars." This unique combination of rigor and looseness is still fresh, wonderfully entertaining, and, in our day of far-off, televised wars, thought-provoking. In the first production, Joan permitted the actors to improvise even in performance. This unpredictability aroused the angry attention of those in power. Hard as it may be to imagine now, government inspectors lurked at the theatre, there to ensure that the script was performed "as written." They took Joan to court not once but twice, fining her for perceived infractions but she held her cussed head high and carried on undaunted. There never was a definitive production script, then or, some say, even now. She trusted actors. She trusted people.

"I really do believe in the community," she once said. "I really do believe in the genius in every person. And I've heard that greatness come out of them, that great thing which is in people. And that's not romanticism, d'you see?" A true believer to the very end, Joan Littlewood and this timeless play are true originals.

BACKGROUND NOTES CONTINUED ...

Tidbits

- Michael Caine lasted only one production with Littlewood's company. "Piss off to Shaftsbury Avenue," she famously told him, referring to the film industry. "You will only ever be a star."
- Richard Harris, on the other hand, the late great Irish actor who played Professor Dumbledore in the Harry Potter movies, worked with her for five years. He went to the West End in *Fings Ain't Wot They Used to Be*, TW's raucous musical exploration of London's criminal underworld. From there he was lured away to ... Shaftsbury Avenue.
- Theatre Workshop continues to this day under Artistic Director Kerry Michael. The strong community mandate is now paired with a commitment to producing new work that reflects the multi-cultural London of our time. The small area outside the current building is called Gerry Raffles Square, in memory of Joan's longtime partner and collaborator.
- The 1969 film version, called *Oh! What a Lovely War*, was directed by Sir Richard Attenborough. It seems generally to have been considered inferior to the original.
- In 2006, inspired by this play, BBC Radio 4's 15 Minute Musical program looked satirically at Tony Blair's leadership of the country in a piece called *Oh! What a Lovely Blair*.

Notes by Soulpepper Associate Artist Paula Wing

JOAN LITTLEWOOD ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

1914 – October 6, at Stockwell, London, England, Joan Littlewood is born, "out of wedlock" to a single mother who frowns on books. She's raised by her working class grandparents.

1926 – Joan, now a scholarship girl at a convent school, reads voraciously and is already rather inclined to revolutionary thinking. She experiences her first theatrical controversy (and maybe her first artistic thrill) when she directs *Macbeth* at school. The staging of Banquo's death scene is so realistic, the bloody gore so shocking that in the audience Mother Superior faints dead away.

1932 – Joan wins the only London scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and trains to be an actor. She works in the early mornings cleaning offices yet still manages to win the verse-speaking prize. She is cast as Ellie in *Heartbreak House*, rehearsing the play with George Bernard Shaw himself.

1934 – Bored with RADA's conservatism, Joan decides to strike out for America. Her revolutionary plan involves walking to Liverpool to get the boat. She collapses after 130 miles. An unrecorded good Samaritan gives her the rail fare to Manchester, where she settles in for a long apprenticeship.

1935 – She works as a producer for the BBC and writes for the *Manchester Guardian* but mostly she plunges headlong into the counterculture theatre groups that are springing up everywhere. She meets, falls in love with and marries a young Jimmie Miller, who will later be known as folk singer Ewan MacColl.

1936 – She and Miller live with his parents and eke out a living from their work with the BBC, but they put all their energies (and funds) into creating Theatre Union. Its first show, a piece of agitprop theatre, receives rave reviews. Parts of this production will resurface many years later in the opening scene of *Oh, What a Lovely War*.

1939 – M15 places Littlewood under surveillance because of suspected Communist Party associations. She will be under government scrutiny from now until the 1950's.

1941 – Littlewood is blacklisted from the BBC because of her Communist Party ties.

1943 – Her BBC ban is lifted after M15 confirms that she is no longer affiliated with the Communist Party.

1945 – She and her husband create Theatre Workshop, and over the next eight years they explore every facet of the idea of a group of touring players, a concept Littlewood herself once called "the long road to heartbreak." Littlewood and Miller divorce but continue to be associated professionally. She and TW's indefatigable general factotum Gerry Raffles fall in love, forming a bond that will last for more than thirty years.

JOAN LITTLEWOOD ARTIST BIOGRAPHY CONTINUED ...

1953 – Theatre Workshop takes up residence at Stratford, east London, in a building that is falling apart and reeks of cat urine. The actors live (illegally) in the dressing rooms and turn the building into a theatre between rehearsals. Together they stage classic productions of classic plays. (Sound familiar?) Some of Littlewood's best work happens in this period but she will later note wryly that very few people saw it.

1955 – Theatre Workshop finally gets broader notice with a production of Brecht's *Mother Courage and her Children*, directed by and starring Joan Littlewood. She takes a wild young Irish writer called Brendan Behan under her wing, keeping him off the bottle (mostly) and pushing him to write.

1956 – Behan's first play with TW, *The Quare Fellow* (based on his prison experiences) finally garners both reviews and bums in seats and an almost unimaginable (for such revolutionaries) popular run of successes ensues.

1958 – Their production of Shelagh Delaney's then-provocative *Taste of Honey* transfers to the West End.

1959 – *Fings Ain't Wot They Used to Be*, a musical about London criminals is a huge hit and runs for more than two years in the West End.

1962 – With three productions running on the lucrative West End stages, Littlewood walks away from the accolades to work in Nigeria on a (failed) film project with future Nobel Prize-winning writer Wole Soyinka.

1963 – She returns to create (along with Raffles, Charles Cilton and the Company) one of her crowning achievements, *Oh, What a Lovely War*. It opens on March 19. In June it transfers to Wyndham's Theatre in the West End, a landmark moment in British theatre history: the first time a political, grassroots theatre achieves popular support. The BBC does the first of several adaptations of the show for radio.

1964 – *Oh, What a Lovely War* opens on Broadway at the Broadhurst Theatre on September 30 and closes four months later on January 16, 1965. It receives four Tony nominations including Best Musical.

1974 – Raffles dies suddenly while on holiday in France. Littlewood rents a house near his grave in Vienne, more or less abandoning the theatre. She befriends her neighbour Baron Philippe de Rothschild, first writing his memoirs, *Milady Vine* and then becoming his "matey but platonic" companion until his death in 1988.

1994 – She returns to England for the launch of her own memoir *Joan's Book*.

2002 – At the age of 87, in London, not geographically far from her Cockney beginnings, Joan Littlewood, radical visionary, passionate artist and tough-as-nails creator, dies of natural causes. In her obituaries she is referred to as "The Mother of Modern Theatre."