

Where Poppies Blow

Written by ~~Written by~~ **Hannah Moscovitch**

Directed by **Christopher McLeod**

Produced by **Salamander Theatre for Young Audiences**

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***Where Poppies Blow* Teacher Kit**

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Salamander Theatre for Young Audiences

Teacher Kit: Where Poppies Blow

Background and follow-up activities

Director's Note

Where Poppies Blow is set in World War One, but it is intended to be about the nature of war in its universal sense. There are inescapable truths about war. It is a terrible waste, a horrendously destructive tragedy, and it should not be sanitized or glorified. On the other hand, this destructive milieu is the background to great acts of heroism. Heroism, in my opinion, is when an individual takes a personal risk for the benefit of others. At the climax of our play Eddy makes a decision that puts him at great risk in order to protect his friends, and some strangers, from harm. Whatever one thinks of the politics that led to the "Great War," Eddy's act undoubtedly exemplifies the best of humanity. This play is meant to spark discussions that explore the tension between the heroic act and its reprehensible context.

Background

The title of our play comes from Major John McCrae's famous poem "Flanders Fields." Fragments of the poem "float" through the play and it is recited in full at the end. Here is the complete text:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
 That mark our place; and in the sky
 The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
 In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from the failing hands we throw
 The torch; be yours to hold it high.
 If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
 In Flanders fields.

Where Poppies Blow Teacher Kit

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Officially, the “Great War” started on July 28, 1914 and ended November 1918. During those four years the Canadian War Museum estimates that:

620, 000 Canadians served in the armed forces
425, 000 actually served overseas
60,000 were killed
172,000 were wounded

Worldwide (according to firstworldwar.com):

7,996,888 soldiers were killed
21,755,196 were wounded

The Play

- 1) Our play starts with the image of a flag that will be unfamiliar to most students. Similar in appearance to the provincial flags of Ontario and Manitoba, the “Red Ensign” featured the Canadian coat of arms on a red field with the Union Jack in the upper quadrant. The flag was modified as the coat of arms changed through time. Our projection shows the flag as it would have looked at the time of the First World War. The ensign was our national flag until the adoption of the maple leaf in 1965.
- 2) Calling someone by a negative nickname distances them from us. Gus refers to Germans being called “Jerry,” Bosch” or “Hun” since the war started.

Discussion Topic:

Have we changed the way we use words today, i.e. “fanatic,” “fundamentalist,” or “terrorist?”

- 3) Gus tells the postman that he has no more “Jerry” in him than the King of England. Until the time of the Great War the British royal family actually carried the German surname Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. King George V was grandson to the German Prince Albert who had married Queen Victoria. The Emperor of Germany was King George’s first cousin.

Discussion Topic:

What does this say about the “us” and “them” rhetoric used in war?

- 4) Eddy's mother is angry at him for joining the army while Gus thinks he did the right thing.

Activity:

Can you write a speech for Eddy or his mother? Can you write a discussion between them? What kinds of things do you think Eddy thought about before he joined? What sorts of things was his mother thinking? Why would James, the middle brother, have to say?

Discussion Topic:

How are their thoughts different from what might be said in your own family if you or one of your siblings wanted to join the army?

- 5) Mick describes his experience of the first use of poison gas at Ypres. The gas used in the first attack in April of 1915 was chlorine, not the better known "mustard" gas that was used later in the war. When the effects of the gas were first felt, French forces abandoned their trenches and the Canadians who were stationed beside them rushed to fill the gap in the line.
- 6) When talking about Billy Bishop, Gus uses the common term "shot down" where official records count "victories". By the end of the war, William Avery Bishop's record as presented on the billybishop.net website was as follows:

Result of Combat	No of aircraft
Down out of control	16
Driven down	3
Forced to land	3
Flamer (not observed to crash)	14
Crashed	36
Total	72

Observation balloons when forced down or destroyed were sometimes counted as victories also. Billy Bishop "flamed" two balloons and forced one down.

Bishop also had five unconfirmed victories: two aircraft driven down, two forced to land and one down, out-of-control. The final tally therefore of credited aircraft, balloons and unconfirmed aircraft is 80.

Our play is set in September of 1917. By that point he had forced 50 airplanes from the sky.

- 7) Dora is working in a munitions factory. The war demanded incredible amounts of ammunition, especially shells. With so many young men fighting overseas, women were given their first access to “unladylike” occupations. Officially their working clothes were called “woman-alls” or “pantletts” to avoid admitting women were now wearing pants. Women faced many greater social obstacles and poor working conditions and, despite their great contributions to the war effort, most of their jobs were taken away from them and given to men at the end of the war.

Vocabulary

dressng station: area of the battlefield where minor wounds are treated.

no-mans-land: area of land between the opposing trenches. This distance is usually less than 50 m.

salient: an angle of a trench that juts out beyond the prevailing front line. ~~~~~^~~~~

shell: metal case filled with explosives fired out of a large cannon.

sniper: in our play the snipers are sharp-shooters who have hidden themselves in no-mans-land.