

An immersive and emotionally turbulent performance, *Wireless Operator* captures the emotional trauma of WWII bomber survivors, reinscribing post-war narratives of heroic survival with a brutally visceral reality.

The play, written by Bob Baldwin and Max Kinnings, tells the true story of an operator and his team's 35<sup>th</sup> and final bomber raid; Baldwin's father was a wireless operator in WW2 and the narrative is compiled from some of his own memoirs. As it stands, the odds dictate that they should have died by their 10<sup>th</sup> mission, making this final raid all the more tense and poignant. The production explores the reality of the trauma sometimes neglected in post-war representations of war heroes, as well as the questions of guilt that plagued survivors, reminding us that survival was not the end of the suffering. A one-man show, Thomas Dennis is operator John, who communicates with the other members of the crew, heard only through the intercom.

The production engages the spectators in a very immersive experience; we feel part of this journey from the very moment at which we enter the theatre and hear the engines already whirring. Throughout, chaotic soundscapes mean that we experience the shocks and jolts of the aircraft more than vicariously. We feel with painful tangibility the transience of each moment of relief and safety following a deafening bomb blast or gun fire. And we share in the moments of tension and unease evoked by the busy soundscape of eerie background noises and inconsistent beeping.

The set is sparse yet effective, with just a versatile contraption that is John's part of the aircraft. This minimalism means our attention is firmly fixated on the character, the voices, and the intensity of the emotions evoked.

The use of intercom for the other members of the crew captures a painful sense of isolation that reinforces our sympathy for John; the physical separation at these near-death moments is heart-breaking.

Yet their conversations feel far from fake and these characters far from distant; their decision to press on for fear of being branded "low moral fibre" and their touching conversations about the everyday hit us almost as hard as John's own monologues.

Dennis plays John with a compelling emotional and physical intensity, heightened by his sharing of intimate tales of childhood and family, spoken in monologue directly to the audience. Captivating but painful, his final realisation, carefully enunciated so that the full force of its meaning is felt, that "I am a killer", demonstrates the sheer difficulty for survivors of rationalising their actions and experiences post-war.

The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ending of WWII is approaching, yet this production feels continually relevant and touching; the theatre company even donate some of the funds raised to Combat Stress, a charity for veteran's mental health. In its electrifying recreation of emotional trauma and guilt, the audience, like John, understands that "no one can make sense of this".

**Juliette Holland**

August 19 2019

The soundscape for this show is mesmerising. The attention to detail that's gone into every voice recording, sound effect, and piece of music is well worth the - clearly significant - amount of time it took to put together. There's a cast of nine, of whom we only ever see one (Thomas Dennis as John, the titular wireless operator of a WWII Lancaster Bomber), with the remaining eight giving their pre-recorded voices to the production.

We are immersed in the sounds of this world: plane engines, the crew members' communications with each other, conversations with loved ones, the sounds of bombs dropping and the terrors wrought by this work are all conveyed through a rich combination of recordings. The final result is an amalgamation between a radio show and a stage play, with this heavy audio element and a simple, but striking, structure present onstage. This singular piece of set is a curious, purpose-built metal frame, which is used to represent John's control desk. It is firmly attached to the stage's frame above, but also allows freedom of movement from where John sits; it can rotate, sway, and tilt to indicate what is happening to the plane, and this is used to good effect.

Occasionally the unrelenting sound - particularly that of the droning plane engines - becomes tiresome, and it is a relief when some of the play's quieter scenes emerge. The nature of this play of course means that the deafening horrors of the protagonist's job are laid bare; but even so, the frequent shouting that comes through the stage speakers is sometimes slightly uncomfortable in its volume. However, the simplicity of the staging rescues the complexity, depth and volume of the show's sound from becoming overwhelming, with the set-up of the control desk being simple but effective. It conveys the claustrophobic, intense environment of being inside one of these planes, while also making use of the space around it on the stage. Dennis works from inside the metal frame, speaking to the crew and responding to the events unfolding around them, but often clambers up higher or moves around this structure. He is confident in his movements, and utterly convincing as the wireless operator.

Something this play does excellently is combine the homely with the horrific: after the sudden death of one young crew member, another remarks that it was his twentieth birthday only "last week", and John talks of marriage and children even as he works with his crew to drop bombs on civilians with the greatest accuracy. Dennis' performance is completely absorbing, and his ability to flit naturally between the different emotional states of his character is strikingly believable. As he speaks to the audience, resigned, exhausted, and fragile, with the words, "I'm alive - maybe that's enough for now" - it becomes obvious just exactly how devastating the toll of this job was for these men. Ultimately, this play conveys tragedy, fear, and fleeting moments of hopefulness in an innovative and absorbing way, **giving a starkly horrifying insight into the terrifying job of a bomber crew in WWII.**

**Martha Crass**

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