# Topic Exploration Pack

# Theme: Conflict

# Oh What a Lovely War – Joan Littlewood

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This Topic Exploration Pack supports OCR AS and A Level Drama and Theatre.

### Introduction

Exploring conflict in theatre gives students the opportunity to understand various types of conflict and explore and research the root cause of a range of situations. It gives opportunities for in depth character analysis and an exploration of relationships, finding new ways to demonstrate relationships on stage. Oh What a Lovely War was originally inspired by Charles Chilton’s BBC Radio 1 broadcast called A Long Long Trail. A World War 1 soldier’s story was told through song using many popular songs from the war. From this, Joan Littlewood and her theatre company got the idea for Oh What a Lovely War and began to piece together ideas to make it a success.

**Synopsis**

Oh What a Lovely War opens with characters only labelled by their countries and status e.g. Frenchwoman, French officer, Kaiser, British Admiral etc. They are playing *The War Game* led by M.C.Conflict arises in this scene through the different countries arguing about things that have happened between them including accusing each other of stealing land that wasn't theirs and discussing who has the biggest acreage. Midway through this scene, the countries begin to declare war on each other and each country makes a decision on whether to participate in the war or not. The war is announced with the aim to destroy Germany and England; throughout this scene there are slides showing pictures of the war and announcements being made by NEWSPANEL.Once the war is finally announced THE GIRLS sing Y*our King and Country.* Many songs are placed throughout this scene with announcements including the falling of Brussels being included intermittently. THE GIRLS then enter the scene wearing revealing, sexy costumes, they sing *I'll Make a Man of You* which is a propaganda song persuading men to enlist for the war, propaganda pictures are projected throughout. In the next scene, as soldiers are wounded, nurses take them off on stretchers and make promises such as ‘*Don't worry, we'll have you back in the firing line within a week!’* The soldiers sing *Pack up your Troubles* as they're carried off - NEWSPANELannounces 300,000 allied casualties during August.

Six Soldiers are together taking the mickey out of Fourth soldier for writing to his girlfriend. He is, in fact, writing an article for *The Wipers Gazette*. He reads it to the other man and reveals that he is taking the mickey out of anyone feeling optimistic about the war; he calls optimism the dreaded disease. The other soldiers begin to joke about problems faced by real soldiers in the war e.g. trench foot; corns; gripes and chilblains. The soldiers then hear somebody singing *Silent Night* in German. They make friends with a German soldier and all begin to sing Christmas songs together. A boot is then thrown into the trench and the soldiers discover it is a boot full of gifts from the German soldiers, they decide to send one back, they agree to meet and share a Christmas drink together. As they exit, the M.C.sings *Goodbye-ee* with THE GIRLS*.* The first act ends with NEWSPANELsaying *‘WELCOME 1915...HAPPY YEAR THAT WILL BRING VICTORY AND PEACE’* followed by an explosion.

Act 2 opens in April with announcements of deaths and the song *Oh It's a Lovely War* sung by the Pierrots. M.C. announces that 51,000 men in West Ham have left home due to the Conscription Act. THE GIRLS are directly addressing the audience with propaganda about women sending their men to fight in the war; they each throw a white feather after their line. M.C. apologises for interrupting the war game in the first act and promises that part two will commence. Grouse shooting commences with A SCOTTISH GHILLIE, A SWISS BANKERand a party of BRITISH, FRENCH, GERMAN and AMERICANmunitions manufacturers. Their conversation addresses many cultural stereotypes and makes jokes about the various countries involved in the war. There are moments of conflict within this scene as they make comments to each other about their countries. As they exit, they sing *Gassed Last Night,* as slides of soldiers running to avoid gas and being gassed are shown.

FIVE BRITISH SOLDIERS enter and make a barricade; they are having conversation as explosions are happening around them. They make casual comments about the place stinking of decomposing bodies. SIR JOHN FRENCH, SIR WILLIAM ROBETSON and SIR DOUGLAS HAIG dance with their partners who are all wearing tiaras or feathers. This scene is full of lies and deceit with the characters all talking behind each other’s backs about who should have been promoted and who shouldn't have. They gossip in upper class accents of the time period the scene ends with HAIG and LADY HAIG plotting for him to get a field-marshal's job. *Hush Here Comes a Whizz-bang* follows this scene accompanied with slides of dead soldiers and other horrifying images. BRITISH SOLDER and HAIG enter a conflict about the war, BRITISH SOLDIERargues that the war has become a slaughter and HAIGstates that it is for the king and empire and they must continue. HAIGmakes a speech about how England should gain victory by the destruction of German militarism as the song *There's a Long Long Trail*is sung over the top to cause a juxtaposition. It is announced that one and a half million men have lost their lives. BRITISH SOLDIER argues with HAIG, explaining they are running out of men and most of them won't rise from the trenches. HAIG protests and insists they shall continue with some new ‘chappies’ from Ireland.

MRS PANKHURSTenters and reads a speech from George Bernard Shaw. She speaks of the men losing their lives and the bloodbaths and explains that Germany has made peace offerings. Throughout the speech MEN and WOMEN tell her to ‘be quiet’ and ‘watch it!’ It is then announced that 60,000 men were lost on the first day of Somme (1st July).

TWO DRUNKEN SOLDIERS enter and sing *I don't wanna be a soldier.* They are then joined by the other soldiers who march around the stage whistling and then end up in a line behind HAIG, who explains his plan of attack. TWO ENGLISHWOMEN enter from either side and begin gossiping about stories such as The Germans are melting corpses for glycerine. TWO GERMAN WOMEN then enter and do the same in German. A Runner informs HAIG and BRITISH GENERAL that there are 70% casualties. HAIG announces that they will attack at dawn. THE SOLDIERS sing *If You Want The Old Battalion* softly. HAIG instructs that there shall be no squeamishness over losses and the soldiers should advance immediately. BRITISH GENERAL continues to try to persuade HAIG that too many lives have been lost and they should consider other ways out of the war but HAIG is insistent on fighting it.

It is announced that two and a half million men have died on the western front by Nov 1916. HAIG states that the attack was a great success and the wounded are very cheery indeed. During a song sung by the soldiers, time passes and another announcement is made in April 1917 - 180,000 more men. As the play draws to a close, more announcements are made by NEWSPANEL to show the passing of time and more lives being lost. GIRLS walk across the stage looking at the casualty list and having conversations about those who have lost loved ones and those who have made money from selling their bodies. They exit but one girl stays and sings *Sister Susie's Sewing Shirts.* She tries to encourage the audience to join in the song with her.

PIERROTS enter and discuss that 1918 is looking promising for the war to come to an end. FRENCH SOLDERS enter and line up for advance they are trying to protest and say it is stupid to return to the trenches, however FRENCH OFFICER informs them that they will be shot if they don't obey, therefore they agree to follow like sheep and obey. The play closes with announcements to end the war rounding up numbers of those missing, wounded and dead. MENsing *And When They Ask Us* and then the women join in for the finale of *Oh What a Lovely War.*

**Conflict in the play**

Conflict in the play comes in many forms. The first is the obvious conflict between countries at various points throughout the play. However, more conflict is seen within the same sides, as they are disagreeing. British General and Haig have many debates throughout the play as British General believes too many lives have been lost and Haig believes they should keep on fighting. At the dance, the characters are backstabbing each other showing that they don't really trust everyone and are all in it for themselves. This scene could be a vehicle for students to explore the conflict in more detail through building on the scene. There is further conflict between the French Officer and Soldiers at the end of the play.

Oh What a Lovely War still holds great relevance in today’s world where war, corruption and greed are still prevalent. This play is a fantastic opportunity to educate young people on the war and remember the men who died fighting in it.

Oh What a Lovely War is a satirical play, specifically in reaction to the First World War but also relating to the topic of war in general. It combines various different styles of theatre but is ultimately classified as an ‘epic musical’. The play aims to remind the audience that they are watching a play as per Brechtian theatre. The play is usually performed in Pierrot costumes, embodying the stock character of the sad clown who is seen as a naïve fool, oblivious to reality. The production plays with the contrast between reality and the crazy action of the clowns. Real songs from the First World War are featured throughout the musical and to juxtapose these harsh, shocking images of war, and statistics are often projected into a backdrop simultaneously. The play is an episodic play including various characters and scene throughout and gives great opportunity for students to explore multi-role.

### Suggested activities

### Activity 1 – Brecht and Epic Theatre

**Starter**

In groups, pick one of the following to demonstrate to the class as a game of charades. Can they guess which word it is?

Episodic.

Juxtaposition.

Didactic.

Ensemble.

Epic.

Satire.

**Activity using the script (extract of your choice)**

Read the scene as fast as possible. Try and speed it up even as it is read through. Identify two key moments within the extract read. Focus on the line before the key moment and the line after, to turn fast forward into slow motion. Act out the key moments using fast forward and slow motion to emphasise the chosen sections.

(These key moments should be where something else could have happened, an alternative is possible.)

**Discussion**

What if these key moments didn’t happen, but an alternative took place instead?

What else could have happened at that moment?

**Activity using devising**

Improvise short scenes, showing alternative key moments.

For example, if your key moment was when they called for stretcher bearers, improvise a short scenario where stretcher bearers arrived and helped the wounded.

Insert this into your scene prepared from the script and put a freeze frame either side of the change. Pick up the scene where you left off in the script to show it didn’t really happen.

**Plenary discussion**

Brecht called this technique ‘not….but.’

Why do you think this was?

What do you think the effect of this is?

How effective might this be in a performance?

### Activity 2 – Brecht and Gestus

**Starter activity**

Discuss the meaning of Gestus.

Brecht most commonly used gestus to show the social attitude through music, song and through actions that demonstrated a character's attitude. Where is this exemplified in the play?

**Statements about War**

The title of the scene is ‘War’. Students work in pairs with A as the director and B as an actor.

A directs B into a frozen image that creates a statement about the nature of war. A has to decide on the statement and write it on paper, e.g. ‘War kills!’ or ‘War destroys families!’

A then has to add themselves to the frozen image to demonstrate the meaning of the statement.

Change partners and decide on characters. One **must** be an ordinary soldier. The other character could be:

a mother or father

a General

a child

your own choice.

Create an image in these characters. Again your picture must have a title that says something about the nature of war.

**Discussion on semiotics**

If you had one prop, which prop would you add to the image that makes your message clearer?

Why or how would this add to the message?

**Creating gestures**

In groups of four, consider the following:

What social attitude was your character showing in the images?

For example:

War is frightening.

War is bad.

War is glory.

War is honour.

War is justified.

Each character creates a different gesture that shows their attitude. Help each other to create a gesture which involves moving their arms. The gesture must not be a still image.

Develop the sequence of gestures into a short montage to show another group and get feedback on how clear the social attitude of each character is.

**Developing setting**

Consider where these characters could all be together at the same time. For example:

airport

station

high street

hospital

other.

Create a short scene at this setting, in which each character used their gestus at least twice.

**Extension – The Girls**

Read from ‘Women in England, do your duty…’ to ‘What did you do in the Great War, daddy?’ in the scene with The Girls.

What attitude do they show in their statements?

Using the scene ‘The Girls’, direct the group including gestus shows their social attitude. Remember: If it doesn’t show social attitude it isn’t a gestus – if it is still it isn’t a gesture.

**Plenary**

Gestus can also show contradictions and it can create a juxtaposition.

How could you use this idea in Oh What a Lovely War?

### Activity 3 – Meyerhold’s ‘key skills’ of the actor

**Key skills of the actor**

Meyerhold wanted ‘A theatre which strove not to smooth out problems…but to let them resonate within the minds of his performers and his audiences.[[1]](#footnote-1)’

Well rounded creative thinkers are able to use a range of theatrical styles and incorporate anything relevant from all of theatre history.

Introduce Meyerhold and the key skills:

precision

responsiveness

expressiveness

rhythm

efficiency

playfulness and discipline

co-ordination

balance.

Watch a recording of a performance. This could be a previous student performance, a professional production or something online.

Ask students to look out for each of the above key skills during the performance.

Discuss each one in detail and define what they are.

**Group work**

Use Meyerhold’s key skills of the actor to introduce and show the different countries in the War game?

Scottish ghillie

Germany

Britain

France

Switzerland

America.

Share the work and feedback on the use of the skills.

### Activity 4 – Exploring songs

**Non-naturalism in theatre**

Discuss the key features of non-naturalistic theatre. This could include ideas such as:

In-Yer-Face Theatre (Invading the audience’s personal space/making them feel uncomfortable).

Repetition and Motif.

Distorted order.

Physical Theatre.

Ensemble work.

Canon.

Unison.

Choral Speech.

Improvise or create a short scene which exemplifies each feature.

**Performing songs**

Choose a song from Oh What a Lovely War. Rehearse and perform the song using at least three of the key features of non-naturalism from the previous activity. Each group should use different features where possible.

Share the work and feedback on the choice of non-naturalistic feature.

### Activity 5 – Placards, spaβ and juxtaposition

**Starter**

Brecht wanted to make his audience think about issues within his work and he realised that as we laugh we also think. Even with a serious message, Brecht realised using comedy was a great way of engaging the audience and making them think about the underlying issues. He wanted to break tension to stop audiences following the characters emotionally.

Discuss examples of where comedy is used in juxtaposition with sadness to make the audience think. These could be from theatre, film, television or other examples students may think of. What effect does this have on the audience?

**Artistic intention**

Think of three key words that the playwright (Joan Littlewood) could have included in her artistic vision for the first performnace of Oh What a Lovely War.

Share these with a partner and use them to create a full sentence for each one. These could refer to atmosphere, mood, impact on audience, social message, emotions for the audience.

Discuss what spaβ means. Spaβ means ‘fun’ as a literal translation.

Add to each sentence created from the key words, how spaβ can be used to realise the artistic intention.

Spaβ might be used in the form of a comic song, physical comedy or even a stand-up routine. It makes a strong social comment in the way it’s used in the treatment of a serious subject.

**Group work**

Choose a scene which can be performed to realist the artistic vision created previously. Students may wish to combine visions and work in larger groups.

Start by creating silent movie style placards that will bring out the key facts of your scene. Add some placards that add spaβ to your scene.

**Rehearsal reminders**

You need to bring out the comedy of the scene to enhance to satire.

Consider how can you do this? (Voice, posture, mannerisms, leading from body parts.)

Could you use slapstick moments?

You must try to create a juxtaposition. Make it sad and funny at the same time.

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1. Pitches, J. (2003) *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, London and New York. Routledge. ISBN: 9781134513550. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)