

The trench watch and the relentless passing of time

Michael Morpurgo was glancing at his watch - which had just come back from the menders – when he hit on the idea for the structure of his novel **Private Peaceful**.

The mender had told him the watch dated from 1915 and, as he reflected on it, Morpurgo decided the watch would stand for the relentless passing of time as young Tommo tries to make his final night last as long as possible.

Each chapter starts with Tommo reluctantly looking at his watch and noting the time. It's a device playwright Simon Reade has retained in his one-man adaptation for the stage – each scene begins with Tommo checking the time before returning to all the things he wants to remember.

In Pick Me Up's production musical themes from George Butterworth's **Songs From A Shropshire Lad** also feature in the scene breaks – including from Loveliest of Trees, a setting of A.E. Housman's poem about the fleetingness of time and the need to treasure every moment while you can.

Wristwatches were rarely worn by men until the First World War, when new military tactics were needed to deal with the huge scale of the Western Front and the distance between the generals and the men they were commanding. Precise timing was needed to coordinate and synchronise action – so a watch was an essential item in an officer's kit.

The traditional pocket watch was not practical for the trenches, so every officer – like Captain Wilkie in *Private Peaceful* – was expected to purchase a "trench watch" worn on the wrist. The sight of men back home from the front wearing their trench watches meant they became popular – and pocket watches went out of fashion as both men and women wore wristwatches.

George Stagnell, who plays Tommo in the production at the Edinburgh Fringe, wears an authentic trench watch worn by a soldier who fought on the Western Front.

Tommo leaves his watch behind in the barn at the end of the final scene - and, as he walks off, a theme from another Butterworth song is heard.

It's the poignant melody Butterworth uses to close his **A Shropshire Lad Rhapsody** and is from the first line of the song:

*With rue my heart is laden
For golden friends I've had,
For many a rose-lipt maiden
And many a lightfoot lad.*

*By brooks too broad for leaping
The lightfoot boys are laid,
The rose-lipt girls are sleeping
In fields where roses fade.*

NOTES TO EDITORS:

Contact:

Jo Hird on [07969 050490](tel:07969050490) or jo.hird@mac.com

Website:

www.pickmeuptheatre.com/fringe
www.pickmeuptheatre.com/shropshire-lad

Performances:

Private Peaceful 14-19 August 9.55am, 21-26 August 4.35pm
Songs From A Shropshire Lad 22-26 August 6pm

Venue:

theSpace@NiddryStreet Venue 9 EH1 1TH