

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2018: A War of Two Halves



It's 1914. One of the bloodiest conflicts the world has seen – described at the time as the 'war to end all wars' – breaks out in Europe. In Scotland, football continues and is seen by many as a welcome distraction from the horrors of war in Europe. However, there are many who feel those playing football should be turning their attention to more serious matters on foreign shores.

At the top of the Scottish First Division sit Heart of Midlothian FC. They have won 19 of 21 matches and it seems no one can stop Edinburgh's finest football club becoming Scottish league champions. Then, one of the Hearts players says he is going to volunteer to serve his country – conscription wasn't introduced until 1916. Thirteen of the Hearts players would volunteer to serve together in Sir George McCrae's Battalion destined to fight in France. They were joined by Hearts supporters and players and supporters of other clubs after a rallying call at Edinburgh's Usher Hall.

A War of Two Halves is the story of these young Hearts players; an evocative and dramatic journey through Tynecastle Park led by the players/soldiers in a unique site-specific performance.

The passion shown by those young actors is what is striking about this performance. When you sit in the present-day Hearts changing room at Tynecastle – as part of the performance – the presence of these young actors, resplendent in the Hearts strip of 1914 takes you back more than a century. Hearts

manager John McCartney, played by Tim Barrow, looked stylish in his bowler hat.

The story begins with Alfie Briggs – one of the Hearts players in that famous team – played with some style by Bryan Lowe (in the afternoon session I saw – he and Paul Beeson trade these roles) and you know Lowe is an ardent Hearts supporter by the way he kisses the maroon shirt in the opening minutes. Acting doesn't teach you this – it comes from the heart.

This is a passionate and very well acted story which leaves a lump in the throat not only for those Hearts supporters present but for everyone else witnessing this superb production.

Written by Paul Beeson & Tim Barrow, and featuring a cast of young Scottish actors, *A War of Two Halves* is directed by Bruce Strachan, Artistic Director of Nonsense Room Productions.

Strachan says: *"This is a truly iconic story and is absolutely synonymous with Edinburgh and Heart of Midlothian Football Club. It is an honour for us to bring this story to life. With 2018 marking 100 years since the signing of the Armistice, it is the perfect time to share the remarkable story of "the bravest team" for a new generation of fans. Every Hearts fan will have heard of McCrae's Battalion – this is the chance to really understand their story. For a wider audience, the opportunity to experience a behind-the-scenes view of a football stadium with a dramatic retelling of historical events will be a truly unique Fringe experience."*

Heart of Midlothian Football Club welcome audiences to their stadium, the historic Tynecastle Park and said:

"It is absolutely fitting that in the year of the centenary of the Armistice, Tynecastle Park should host This is My Story's production, A War of Two Halves. By telling the story that started with a rallying cry at our ground from Lieut-Col. Sir

George McCrae, it pays homage to the footballers who volunteered to go to the front in 1914. Many paid the ultimate price for their country. Their memory will never be forgotten and is honoured throughout Tynecastle Park. This is a story that needs to be told to as broad an audience as possible. It takes on particular poignancy as it comes to life in the very ground the team left in 1914, with action taking place throughout the stadium. This unique "promenade performance" will undoubtedly be a standout piece in this year's Fringe Festival and we would urge parents to consider bringing their children to experience this historically important production and to learn of the sacrifice of "the bravest team."

Fans of all football clubs are welcome. Indeed, even if you're not a football fan you can't fail to feel emotional at the telling of this heart-warming yet tragic story. I defy you not to have a lump in your throat at the end of the performance.

A War of Two Halves plays at Tynecastle Park from until Sunday 19th August 2018, with shows beginning at 1pm, 3:30pm, 6pm and 8:30pm daily (not Sat 11th). Tickets [here](#).

Edinburgh Reporter rating: ****