

# "JOURNEY'S END"

## Broadway in Review

By ROBERT LITTELL

*Journey's End*, by a hitherto unknown English author, R. C. Sherriff, at once duplicated its London success when Gilbert Miller, by arrangement with Maurice Browne, brought a second company to New York in March. Lacking almost entirely in plot, and written with deliberate under-emphasis and urbanity, it realizes the futility of war by a restraint made overwhelming with its calm and gallantry. . . . Above, Derek Williams as Second Lieutenant Raleigh, and Colin-Keith Johnston as Captain Stanhope.



**T**HE feeblest month of a feeble season was triumphantly redeemed by Gilbert Miller's importation and production, on March 22nd, of the English war play, *Journey's End*, a singularly restrained and moving piece of writing, admirably directed and acted. One of those all-too-rare occasions in the theatre which are completely satisfying and memorable.

The author of *Journey's End*, R. C. Sherriff, is an English insurance agent, whose name was unknown until the play set London audiences and critics to wiping tears from their eyes. Gilbert Miller, who recently forswore all original producing in America, carried out his policy of importing English companies intact by rehearsing a second cast for *Journey's End*. The English critics, it appears, were not favorably impressed by this second production, which seemed to them hastily rehearsed, badly directed and acted, and altogether unworthy of the fine play made so instantaneously famous by the original company. The showing made by the second company here indicated that (1) the critics were wrong, or (2) the company improved enormously before the New York opening, or (3) the original company must have been superhuman. For it is difficult to imagine a better performance at all important points.

*Journey's End* could not have been written by an American, and would have been rather different if written sooner. Coming some ten years after the armistice, it is the greater for an impartial tenderness and restrained, hopeless sympathy which would have been hard to achieve just after the smoke and corpses had been cleared away. There is a far wider gap between the temper of *Journey's End* and our own best war play, *What Price Glory*, than can be accounted for by the shorter time Americans were in the war. There is a real national difference. *Journey's End* is English, or British, through and through. To some hard-boiled Americans it may seem here and there a trifle sentimental, a trifle like wearing its heart on its sleeve. On examination I do not believe this objection would be supportable or actually an objection.

The action of *Journey's End* takes place in an officers' dug-out a few yards from the front line trenches in March, 1918. The story is of the simplest, and neither in it nor in the telling of it is there a false note. The company commander, Stanhope, is a brilliant, capable product of the English public school, who drinks far too much, solely because it is the only means he has of stilling an inner terror and sickness which come over him in moments of danger. His second in command, Osborne, is a quiet, sensitive, competent schoolmaster of about forty. There is a matter-of-fact, middle-class, middle-aged, unimaginative lieutenant, a rotter, who fakes

## “JOURNEY’S END”

neuralgia just before an attack and has to be threatened with a gun. Into this underground refuge of tired, gallant men comes a youngster, Raleigh, one week out of training camp. Stanhope was three years ahead of him at school, Stanhope had fallen in love with his sister. The last thing that Stanhope wants is to see this face, this echo of another quieter life where he, who needs a bottle a day to keep his nerve, is still thought of as a spotless hero. A general attack by the Germans is expected. Stanhope is ordered to arrange a raid and bring back a German prisoner. Reluctantly he agrees to the Colonel’s choice of Osborne and Raleigh. Osborne is killed. Later in the day Raleigh is killed.

The detail, the incidents and the conversations which bring the story to life are extraordinarily good. The play contains dozens of brief scenes, each of which flows naturally, quietly into the next, but each of which is distinct in itself. Several of these scenes are funny, several exciting, others are deeply disturbing, unforgettable. A strange and moving scene is that of the minutes Osborne and Raleigh spend together before going out on the raid. It is courageous, deeply sympathetic. It strips down to its essentials the soul of an aching atom about to be crushed under the wheels of a huge war.

All of the men in *Journey’s End* are seen not as soldiers, heroes, or villains, but as individuals. The drawing is done with a curiously sure understatement. There is not a single caricature. The weak lieutenant, with his pathological fear and his excuse of neuralgia and his narrow, hysterical, sordid mind, is not held up for us to scorn, but to understand. Stanhope, Raleigh and Osborne are, if you like, heroes, but their heroism is only a by-product, something that naturally follows from being true to themselves rather than to some author’s idea of them.

One cannot help feeling, all the way through, that this is exactly the way things happened among men who hated the war, who went through with it, after nearly four years, with gallant weariness and stoical disillusion. There is no comment anywhere to show what the author thinks of war. You can guess, but you cannot hear him saying it is horrible or cruel, or ought to be stopped, or must never happen again. There is a better way to speak of war than by such editorializings or shoutings worked into a play. Let the characters do what they would have done, speak for themselves, and the moral is unescapable.

It is a better war play than *What Price Glory* because it represents war as the majority of the men knew it who fought in it. There is nothing in *Journey’s End* as wild-humored, as gorgeously written as the characters of Sergeant Quirt and Captain Flagg, but *What Price Glory* was more concerned with the conflict between these two than with the war itself, and the actual war scenes of *What Price Glory* were not as good as the passages between Quirt and Flagg. *Journey’s End* is the war after four years, the war of obedient civilians who grit their teeth, the war of a nearly exhausted nation, not the war of adventure and cognac and Mam’selles. It is more subdued, more hopeless, more tragic, more grown up and much nearer to the real thing.

Gilbert Miller imported and produced *Journey’s End*. The program credits James Whale with the direction of it. And it is good direction, completely in key with the play’s heartbreaking quiet and bursts of anger, terror, agonized memory and abstraction. Nor does one see how the acting could very well have been improved. The men—there are no women in the cast—are all excellent. Leon Quartermaine as Osborne made the deepest impression on me, but Colin Keith-Johnston as Captain Stanhope, Derek Williams as young Raleigh, Henry Wenman as Trotter, Victor Stanley as Mason, Jack Hawkins as Hibbert, the sufferer from neuralgia, were fine.

One of the effects of anything so simple and desperately genuine

## “JOURNEY’S END”

and clear-eyed as *Journey’s End* is to leave the spectator overwhelmed and upset. It will be some weeks before I shall be able to write about it calmly.

### “KEYING DOWN”

#### *The Secret of Journey’s End*

By W. A. DARLINGTON

(a segment from a longer article)

The curtain rose—and instantly I was taken back into the very atmosphere of the trenches; and, as luck had it, into the very same sector of the trenches in which I had had my own first experience of the front line, and which had supplied me with a setting for my own very different war story, *Alf’s Button*. I had not conceived it possible that any play could so exactly recall those old memories. As the first act developed, I suddenly found myself fighting for self-control, and knew that unless I could summon up reserves of restraint from somewhere, the first interval would display to the light the shocking spectacle of a hard-boiled dramatic critic in tears. I reached the end of the act safely, and my wife, turning to me, asked, “*Was* it like that?” I gave a couple of horrible gulps and said, “Exactly like that.” She nodded and said almost to herself, “I’ve never really known till now.”

# Theatre Arts Monthly

---

MAY, NINETEEN TWENTY NINE

---

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)

