

Okay, a slow start today. I need to take a break.

I decided that I have had enough of West End Theatre. Don't get me wrong, I have enjoyed all of the big West End shows I have seen, and with the exception of [Speed The Plow](#), I have seen them all for half-price or less. But, I realised that I am enjoying the edgier shows found in the off-West End venues even more. These shows, up till now including [A Prayer For My Daughter](#), [Grapes Of Wrath](#) and [Thin Toes](#) all have been powerful, well acted and well produced, and I haven't spent more than £15 to see any of them.



So, this morning I went on line and Googled "Off West End" and found myself at [Off West End](#) a website run for this unique theatre community. I used their handy tools to narrow my search to shows which would be going on tonight, and found [The Living Unknown Soldier](#), at Arcola Theatre, a show based on a real event which explores the tenuous line between memory and reality.

The show, like the three examples above, was brilliant. It is based upon a written account of a man who from 1919 to 1942 lived in an asylum in France suffering from amnesia following his service in The Great War. The reviewers have uniformly liked it, and I agree with their take. The script ably tackles the fungible space between reality and perception, memory and truth, and the pathetic (I mean that in the classical sense) circumstance of the poor man at the centre of this exercise. Throughout the play people try to come and claim this lost man as their own father, son, husband. He has none of it. "I feel like an innocent that you are all trying to pin a crime on" he complains at one point. You are shocked at this, because the woman trying to claim him at this point, ten years into his sad lot, is one you really want to be the one.

It is hard to pinpoint any particular performance, or performer, for praise in this production. This has a lot to do with a production choice made by Simple8, the company presenting this show. The cast rotates through the various characters, especially the soldier. It is quite literally a tag-team effort for most of the show, where one actor will touch and trade places with another and take over the role of the soldier. This is an effort to make the audience not think about the particular appearance or physical characteristics of the soldier but rather to focus on his lot. It is painfully effective.

I will draw attention to Tom Mison who for much of the show plays a reporter sucked into the story, and to Stephanie Brittain for her performance first as an asylum nurse and then for an important part of the action as the soldier, and lastly as a maid who comes to claim her husband despite his abusive past. They, along with Tony Guilfoyle as the long suffering doctor, turn in nuanced and complex performances which help to provide the mortar necessary to hold together this otherwise centrifugal show.

I honestly hope that the BBC gloms onto this show and makes a worthy teleplay of it. The world needs to see this show, and it will only ever happen through a public outlet like the Beeb.

A side note, the theatre, Arcola, is a green space, and this show is the first presented, probably in the world, with a zero carbon footprint. The theatre is equipped with a biomass heating system, a fuel-cell power plant and mostly low power LED based theatrical fixtures. It all worked quite well, and I think this is the shape of things to come.

The next production at Arcola is [Double Portait](#) and I will try to attend.