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**TRUCE: A CHRISTMAS WISH
FROM THE GREAT WAR**
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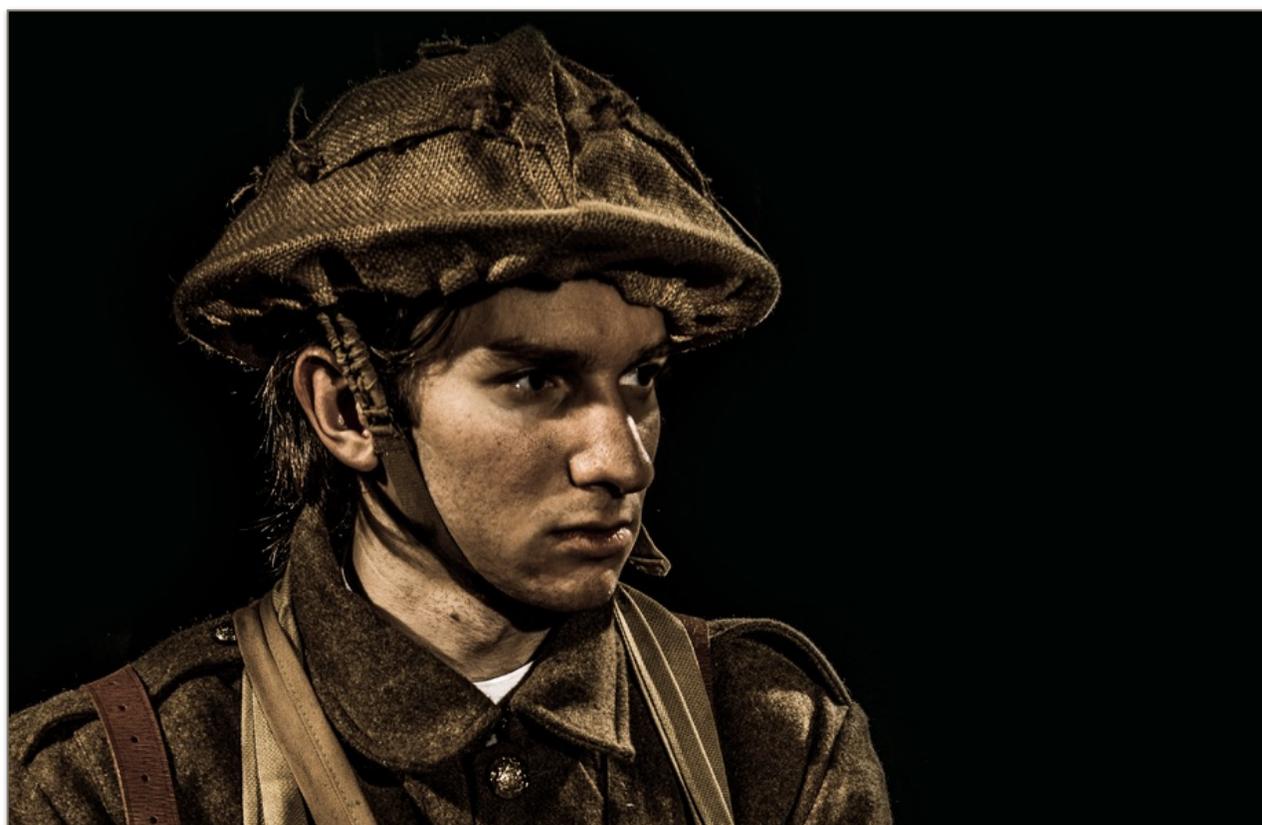


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HIGHLIGHTS

Highlights is researched and written by City Lights marketing director Rebecca Wallace.
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Drew Benjamin Jones as Tommy, a young English soldier. Photo by Mike Ko / siliconvalleydesigns.com.

**A COMPANION GUIDE TO “TRUCE: A CHRISTMAS WISH FROM
THE GREAT WAR” BY KIT WILDER & JEFFREY BRACCO**

SYNOPSIS

Commemorating the centennial of the “Christmas Truce” — in which World War I troops on both sides of the lines staged an impromptu cease-fire on the battlefields of France on Christmas 1914 — this World Premiere tells the story of the truce through scenes, vignettes, live music and song, and letters and documents from the period. *Truce* extends to audiences the Christmas wish of so many who have fought and died in all wars: that mankind may one day lay down his weapons and, in the true spirit of the season, be proponents of Peace on Earth, and Goodwill toward Men.

CHARACTERS

Truce tells the story of this historic event through four main characters:

Georg Krieger (Max Tachis): The German patriot, fighting for honor, glory, and the Fatherland, who is wounded and subsequently meets his match in the hospital nurse in charge of his care.

Anna Friedmann (Caitlin Papp): The German nurse who sharply questions the wisdom of war as she takes the warrior Georg into her care in hopes of “healing” him.

Tommy Williams (Drew Benjamin Jones): The young English poet compelled by tradition and paternal pressure to go to war. He sees through the mechanized carnage of modern battle to the hearts of both his comrades and the “enemy.”

Maggie Williams (Allison Meneley): Tommy’s wife, spirited and sweet, who encourages him in his writing as she waits for his Christmas return.



During a rehearsal, Truce director Kit Wilder watches a poignant scene between Georg (Max Tachis) and Anna (Caitlin Papp).

Photo by Drew Benjamin Jones.

BRINGING THE TRUCE TO THE STAGE

The story of the Christmas truce, an act of peace on the battlefields of France a hundred years ago, seems tailor-made for the theater. This is a vision full of human emotion. Amid the grit and blood of the trenches, English and German troops laid down their arms—cautiously at first, then wholeheartedly—and celebrated the season together: sharing carols, gifts, even a soccer game.

"You don't have to dramatize this. It *is* drama," said Kit Wilder, City Lights' associate artistic director. "The triumph of our better angels in the middle of this horror."

What playwrights do have to do is make the truce personal, telling it through characters the audience cares about. That's what Kit and Jeffrey Bracco set out to accomplish when they wrote the world-premiere play *Truce: A Christmas Wish from the Great War*.



English and German troops during the cease-fire.

They've succeeded in creating a compelling narrative that brings together stories from both sides of the lines. From England: the soldier Tommy (Drew Benjamin Jones), who dreams of being a writer; and his spirited wife Maggie (Allison Meneley) reading his letters sent back home. On the German side: the determined warrior Georg (Max Tachis) and courageous battlefield nurse Anna (Caitlin Papp). All the stories dovetail during Christmas 1914.

"I wanted Tommy to be a poet, Georg a warrior, Anna the angel of mercy. A healer in the midst of all the killing," Kit said.

***"You don't have to
dramatize this.
It is drama."***

–Kit Wilder on the 1914 truce

Truce blends these characters' tales together with the help of historic letters, war accounts, and other period documents: sometimes quoting from them, sometimes simply drawing on them for inspiration and historic details. Timeless Christmas carols create a poignant backdrop, with new arrangements by sound designer George Psarras (more about him later in this issue of *Highlights*).

The play had its beginnings about two years ago, when City Lights Executive Artistic Director Lisa Mallette noted that the centennial of the start of World War I was coming and decided to commission an original work on the topic. Kit, a major history buff, immediately wanted to write the play.

Kit has been fascinated by planes and flying since he was a kid, and by the Great War for almost as many years. "One historian said World War I was basically *the* calamity of the 20th century," he said.

Not only did the conflict sow the seeds for World War II, but it marked a turning point in modern warfare. Coming after the Industrial Revolution, the Great War made horrific use of new killing technology like tanks and poison gas. It also dragged on for four years—when people had sworn it

would be over in a month. Set against this background, the Christmas truce, this brief respite, feels like even more of a miracle.



*Kit and Jeff working together in a different capacity: on stage in Art at City Lights last month.
Photo by Mike Ko.*

Before long, Kit enlisted Jeff, a longtime friend and seasoned writer, director, and actor, to write *Truce* with him. Jeff also had an interest in the topic, having done voiceover work for the 2005 French film *Joyeux Noël*, which was about the truce.

The two dove into research, exploring books, Internet sources, period songs, and numerous documents. While Tommy, Georg, and Anna are not based on real people, their spirits grew out of the words and anecdotes that Kit and Jeff discovered in their research. This could be challenging: the characters have to speak in a way that suggests another time and place, but the script also has to be accessible to modern audiences.

Kit and Jeff had worked together on stage, but a writing partnership was new, and it's been very productive, aided by a weekend writing retreat and lots of good interactions. "He would put pen to paper and send me drafts, and I'd make suggestions and edit," Jeff said. "We went back and forth."

More than once, Kit admitted with a laugh, his ideas teetered too close to the "playwriting cliff" — getting a bit too melodramatic—and his writing partner pulled him back. "We have different tastes and styles. That kept both of us honest," he said.

The pair held two *Truce* readings with local actors, gathering feedback from the readers and audience members and then amending their script. The playwrights are now eagerly looking forward to Opening Night on Nov. 22.

Audiences can expect a vivid portrayal of war, with Ron Gasparinetti's evocative scenic design conjuring up the trenches with the help of video projections. But *Truce* is also a holiday show that depicts the resilience of hope, and the eternal desire for peace and understanding. "It's about humanity. It's about friendship," Jeff said. "That's really at the core of it."

A WORLD WAR I TIMELINE

The nations of Europe were drawing battle lines long before World War I began in 1914.

During the rise of 19th-century imperialism, Britain, Germany, France, and other powers swiftly expanded onto other continents, building colonies and founding industries. There were fine prizes to be had overseas, like the diamonds and gold in southern Africa that Britain and Germany fought over. Tensions intensified among the powers.

Europe splintered into alliances. Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy joined forces to create the Triple Alliance, while Britain, France, and Russia formed the Triple Entente. In the Balkans, Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, infuriating Serbia.

Countries bulked up their militaries and war seemed inevitable. On one morning in June 1914, the powder keg was lit.

Below are some of the major events of the Great War, including several battles mentioned in *Truce*:

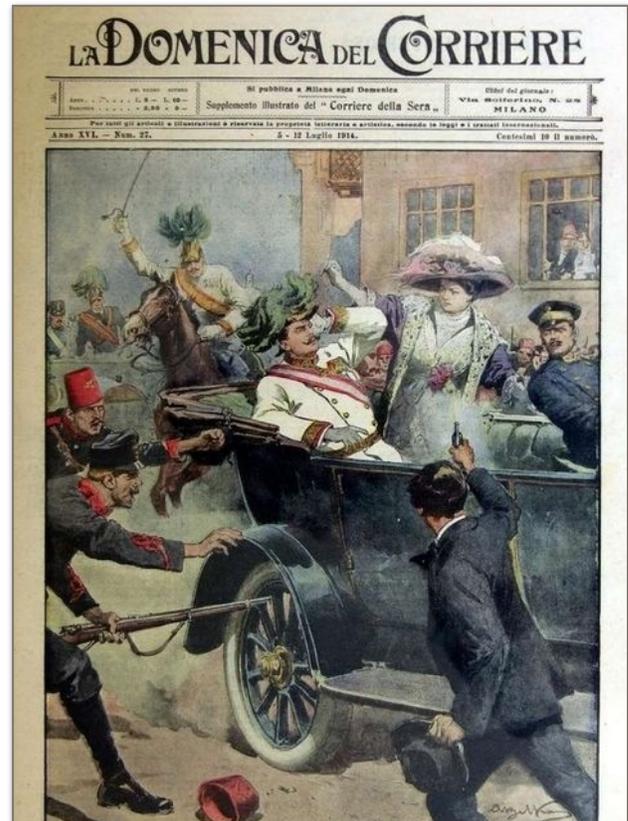
June 28, 1914: In Sarajevo, a young man from a pro-Serbia organization shoots and kills Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire throne.

July 28-31, 1914: Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia. Russia—an ally of Serbia—mobilizes its military.

August 1-4, 1914: Germany declares war on Russia, France, and Belgium. When Germany invades Belgium, Britain declares war on Germany. Meanwhile, most Americans want to stay out of the conflict, and the U.S. announces its neutrality.

August 6, 1914: Austria-Hungary declares war on Russia. Serbia declares war on Germany. Soon, Japan, Turkey, and the Ottoman Empire will also enter the fight.

Late August, 1914: Some 27,000 French troops are killed in a single day in the Battle of the Frontiers as they try to reach the German border. Then Germany scores another major victory on the Eastern Front, routing Russian troops in the Battle of Tennenberg.



The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, as depicted in a 1914 Italian newspaper.

September 1914: The First Battle of the Marne is a win for the other side, stopping the German invasion in France. But the war is far from over. Now, trench warfare begins on the Western Front.



The British War Office encouraged men to enlist by calling on their sense of duty. If they didn't help their country, how would they justify it to their children later?

October-November 1914: The First Battle of Ypres in Belgium is an Allied victory, but at the cost of thousands of deaths on both sides.

December 1914: In honor of Christmas, soldiers on both sides on the Western Front lay down their arms and celebrate the season in an unofficial truce.

January 1915: The truce is short-lived as Germany's Zeppelins launch an air raid on England.

February 1915: German U-boats become the terror of the seas as Germany announces it will fire on any ship nearing Britain. In May, a U-boat sinks the Lusitania, killing 1,198 civilians, including 128 Americans.

September 1915: In France, the British deploy poison gas, one of the most terrifying weapons of the war. Then the winds shift, injuring thousands of British troops.

February-December 1916: The grueling Battle of Verdun in France is the longest of the war, killing or wounding a million soldiers. The Battle of the Somme inflicts another million casualties between July and November. Though the British begin using tanks, there aren't enough for an Allied win.

November 7, 1916: Despite growing American sentiment that the country should become involved, Woodrow Wilson is reelected president with the slogan "He kept us out of war."

January 19, 1917: The Zimmermann Telegram strikes a major blow at Wilson's slogan. The document is allegedly a message from Germany to Mexico, seeking to persuade Mexico to join the war against the United States.

April-July, 1917: President Wilson asks the U.S. Congress to declare war on Germany. A few months later, the American Expeditionary Force makes its first landing in France.

November-December 1917: Led by Lenin, the Bolsheviks



A World War I tank, shown in a Library of Congress photo.

overthrow the government in Russia. The new government signs a peace treaty with Germany.

March-July 1918: Germany launches five major offensives before its advances are halted by British, Australian, and American troops. German soldiers begin to desert.

September-November 1918: Allied troops successfully assail the German fortifications at the Hindenberg Line. Kaiser Wilhelm II steps down, and a new German republic is formed.

November 11, 1918: The Allies and Germany sign an armistice at eleven o'clock on the eleventh day of the eleventh month of the year.

June 28, 1919: The Allies and Germany sign the Treaty of Versailles. It requires Germany to take the blame for starting the war, lose large swaths of land, pay war reparations, and gut its military.

This information is drawn from various sources, including PBS' excellent Great War timeline. Check it out at bit.ly/pbsgreatwar.



The aftermath of the Battle of the Somme. Photo from the Imperial War Museums in the United Kingdom.

THE MUSIC OF “TRUCE”

Truce is a realistic tale of war, but it's also an uplifting Christmas story. So the play needed to sound like more than machine guns and explosions.

Enter George Psarras, a veteran sound designer, composer and actor. He played Amadeus at City Lights last spring, and won a Theatre Bay Area award for his sound design on the show. Recently, George talked with us about the new arrangements he was composing for music from 1914.

Q: What music are you writing for the show?

A: I am arranging about 11 pieces for *Truce*, ranging from popular WWI songs to traditional Christmas carols. Most of the songs we are going to hear are just snippets of tunes, but there are a few moments when we will get to hear a few verses, particularly the Christmas carols as they and

Christmas itself is the unifying factor in this piece. There are five or six carols, and the rest are popular songs that the soldiers and women would have known during this time period.

Q: How do you approach working with music from the World War I period?

A: I try and find out as much as I can about the piece: when it was written, who wrote it, how popular it was, what was the original key, etc. ... The more I know about the music and the history of it, the better it is. Being that this is a new work, I can also help guide the piece of music into a specific context for the work, especially if it's not already in the script. The history of the music will also help me teach it to the performers. If I know the style in which it was originally written or performed, as well as how it will serve the story, I can find a balance in the tone for our version. Some of these songs are rare and forgotten today, so we are all learning about them as we delve into them.



George Psarras.

Q: How are you finding popular music from the time?

A: The BBC is putting out TONS of great material on the centennial of the Great War and so I've been diving into those wonderful resources. And the music was a huge part of the culture during this time. Songs went viral in 1914 because people heard them in music halls or pubs and they bought the sheet music. And of course every theater, pub, and house had a piano and soon everybody would be singing them. The songs were their call to arms, a way of passing the time in the trenches, or the city taverns if you weren't in the war, as well as their yearning for loved ones to return.

Q: What are some of the elements and trends in this music?

A: There is definitely a "turn of the century" sound to these songs. Depending on the rendition you hear, the versions recorded at the time sound like "light opera" or musical theater pieces from the early 20th century. In "Truce" because there is not a character in it who is a famous singer or actor—the characters are much more that of everyday common folk—you may not hear a sound that is quite that "elevated" as you hear in the original versions. But, regardless of how you sing it, these songs still retain the characteristics of a bygone era.



Tommy (Drew Benjamin Jones) and Maggie (Allison Meneley). Photo by Mike Ko.

The popular song "Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag" was one of the biggest hits of the Great War era. Learn more about the song, and hear a clip of it, in a BBC segment at bit.ly/oldkitbag.

City Lights Theater Company presents *Truce: A Christmas Wish from the Great War* from Nov. 20 through Dec. 21, 2014. Shows are Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 p.m. (and 8 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 17) at 529 S. Second St., San Jose.
Details: cltc.org, 408-295-4200

***Truce* credits**

Playwrights: Kit Wilder & Jeffrey Bracco

Director: Kit Wilder

Scenic Design: Ron Gasparinetti

Costume Design: Jane Lambert

Lighting & Projection Design: Nick Kumamoto

Musical Arrangements, Original Music & Sound Design: George Psarras

Properties Design: Pat Tyler

Translations & German-Language Consultant: Julia Sachon

Production Manager: Ron Gasparinetti

Stage Manager: Charnnee' Young

Assistant Stage Manager & Run Crew: Paulino Deleal

Additional World War I costumes: Daniel G. Johnsen, Historical Forces Association

Cast

Karen DeHart, Paulino Deleal, Ivette Deltoro, Nik Duggan, Johanna Hembry, Jacob Marker, Allison Meneley, Joshua Messick, Caitlin Papp, Danraj Rajasansi, Jeremy Ryan, Max Sorg, Mary Lou Torre, Damian Vega, Michael J. West

with Drew Benjamin Jones as "Tommy" and Max Tachis as "Georg"