***The Hired Man***

**Introduction by Mind’s Eye Audio Describers**

Hello and welcome to the Oldham Coliseum for this audio described performance of Melvyn Bragg and Howard Goodall’s The Hired Man, directed by Douglas Rintoul.  The play has been designed by Jean Chan, with lighting design by Prema Mehta and sound design by Chris Murray. The music for the show is performed by the multitalented actors, who play various instruments under the direction of Ben Goddard, seated at the piano.

The performance will last just under two and a half hours, including a twenty-minute interval. Just to advise you, the show will contain loud noises, including gunshots, and the smoking of cigarettes.

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**Set**

Set high in the Cumbrian fells, around the turn of the 20th century, the set for tonight’s show is designed in a minimalist style. Most of the action takes place centre-stage, upon a large circular platform – around 20ft in diameter, which is composed of dark, polished wooden floorboards. The platform is at a slight tilt, to better display what happens there for the audience, and it revolves at times, often during musical numbers.  The floorboards appear as different colours depending on the lighting and the location of the scene - when we are outside, for example, they appear green, when we are in an interior, or later down the mine or on the battlefield, they appear much darker.

An immense backdrop screen dominates the back of the stage. It features a hazy fells landscape – a sky tinged with quiet shades of pink and purple amongst brooding grey clouds. Thick mist hangs over rolling hills, craggy grey rocks and watery, marshy moors.  Trickle stream The scene is painted in a blurry, impressionist style and features a rich palette of natural colours – tans and clay-browns greens and golden yellows. The sky above will change colour with the lighting – often tinged with orange, at other times, a night time blue or a dull grey.  For most of the scenes, the backdrop is lifted away leaving just the top section – the hilltops under the sky.  Beyond this screen , which is gauze so that at times lights shine through it and characters can be glimpsed through it, the back wall fills the width and height of the space.  It is apinted in a stippled stormy grey splattered with specks of black and white– like a heavily clouded sky mottled with raindrops. and again this glows with different colours during the action.

Ramps lead up either side onto the central disc.  In front of these ramps on the floor level at the front left and right, the stage is littered with gravelly earth – which serves as the grainy Cumbrian soil, the mud of no man’s land in France and the coal down the mineshaft.

The tale is brought to life by an ensemble of actor-musicians, who, when not centre-stage, play their instruments from an area at the back, behind and around the back of the central disc, where they are still visible to the audience, though without demanding too much attention. It is from here that Ben Goddard directs the music, seated at the piano to the left. Another piano is found to the right and other instruments include, trumpet, double bass, guitar, violin, clarinet and a cello which , when lying on  its side, doubles as a whippet.

A few props are brought onstage here and there to help communicate changes of scene – a scrubbed wooden table and matching chair with twisted, spindly legs indicate that we have entered the interior of John’s house. Stools, more tables and barrels, all of the same scrubbed wood, indicate the inside of pubs. Two benches are brought up for a meeting of mine labourers and unionists in the second act, and colourful bunting and a linen tablecloth for a later village fete.

**Characters**

Ensemble

The Hired Man chronicles the lives of John Tallentire – a hired farmhand living in the Cumbrian fells – and his wife Emily, and their family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances in the village of Crossbridge.

It features a large ensemble cast who undertake many roles, but principally those of local farm labourers and their wives. In these roles, the colours they wear are quiet and earthy – woody browns, leafy emerald greens and royal blues. The men are decked out in an old-fashioned style – tweed flat caps and suit jackets, waistcoats, neckerchiefs, trousers and hefty work boots. Many of them have beards and rugged, messy hair. The women wear long, modest dresses, shawls and aprons of rich, vibrant colours. The villagers all tend to stand upright and proud.

The story cuts in at several intervals throughout their lives, revisiting them here and there as the years pass by. When the 1st world war rolls around, the young volunteers don army uniforms – peaked military caps with brass insignias sewn into the front and thick tunics and trousers of khaki wool. They heave leather belts, beige puttees around their calves, sturdy boots and carry heavy wooden carbine rifles. The men stand upright to attention or crouch tense and rigid and full of energy when under fire.

Amongst them is an officer, who stands erect and austere, a short middle aged bearded man,  whose uniform is a darker shade of brown, decorated with brass buttons. He wears a leather satchel over one shoulder and multicoloured service stripes in his breast pocket.

John

When we first meet the Tallentires, the couple are in their late teens or early twenties and are newlywed.

John is lean and compactly built, with broad shoulders, a wiry frame and solid, bony knuckles. His complexion is fair and his windswept shock of dark brown hair is fine and silky beneath his orangey-red knitted cap. His facial features are compact and neat – small, watery blue boyish eyes and a short, strong nose. His rugged, square jaw is obscured by a thick, tawny-brown beard.

John stands with a very slight stoop, his eyes often downcast unless gazing skywards in more emotional moments. The ‘strong-and silent-type’, his face is often blank, or his brow furrowed – focused on his work , His body is held tense and rigid, wrought with energy.

John wears a thick jacket of dark blue wool, over a mossy-green waistcoat. The top few buttons of his  off-white shirt are worn open, so that his ruby red neckerchief falls amongst the hairs of his chest. His trousers are a dark, earthy brown and his work boots black.

John is played by Oliver Hembrough.

Emily

Emily is John’s wife.  She is tall, with a golden-brown tanned complexion and smooth skin. Her long brown hair, tinted with caramel blonde, falls in two thick ringlets over one of her broad shoulders. Emily has a strong jaw, and full lips. Her jacket is a rich, passionate ruby red, matching the shade of her crumpled skirt, which is hitched up at one side to reveal one of her long legs.  Beneath her jacket is a straw-yellow buttoned bodice, and a white blouse – lacy and ornate around the collar. Her blouse has puffed shoulders, and her jacket  fits tightly accentuating her curves. When she later removes her jacket, the sleeves of her blouse are revealed to be rolled up over her forearms. Her black leather boots are hefty and almost masculine. Later in the show, Emily dons an emerald green apron.

She stands upright and proud, cocking her head to one side and placing her hands on her hips in moments of anger or defiance. Her smile is warm and genuine, but often she is stony-faced just her eyes conveying her emotion.

Emily is played by Lauryn Redding.

Isaac

John has two brothers – Isaac and Seth. Isaac is taller than John, and is stockier and broader. A tuft of black hair pokes forth from beneath the brim of his black flat cap. He has a small nose and pointed, pixie-like ears, which compliment the twinkle in his eye and his mischievous smile. His broad face is covered in slight, brown stubble. Isaac wears a mossy-green jacket, over a pale orange satin waistcoat and a bright yellow neckerchief. His tawny brown trousers are tucked into his bright turquoise socks. Isaac’s movements are fluid and effortless, as is his warm smile.

Samuel Martin plays Isaac.

Seth

Seth is medium height, lean and bendy. His face is long and slender, clean shaven with high cheekbones, and is coal stained, as are his clothes. He first appears in a grey tweed flat cap and a clay coloured jacket over a grey cotton undershirt. His grey-blue overalls are shabby and fraying. Seth holds himself proudly, chin high and walks with a lithe, energetic spring in his step.

TJ Holmes plays Seth.

Pennington

Pennington is a local farmer, out hiring men during the opening scene. He is short and stocky, his head balding beneath a grey tweed flat cap. The hair which remains around the back and sides of his head is a steely grey, as is his long bushy beard, which is still tinged with brown. Whereas some of the farm labourer’s costumes have a colourful, ‘mix-and-match’ element to them, Pennington’s outfit is more coherent and sharper. It is composed of a tweed suit of a rich earthy brown, worn over a slate-grey waistcoat and a red tie.

Pennington has a hard stare, which he uses to size up potential hirees at the fair.

Pennington is played by Jon Bonner.

Jackson

Pennington has a son, Jackson, in his mid-twenties. He is tall, broad and stocky with ruffled brown hair and a short, patchy beard. His complexion is fair, with a strong roman nose and dark blue eyes. He sometimes wears a black flat cap, which he doffs when talking to women, and is in the habit of rolling cigarettes. The sleeves of his grey-white shirt are rolled up over thick forearms and a golden handkerchief protrudes from the breast pocket of his black waistcoat, which is made of shimmering satin at the back. His loose trousers are a stony shade of grey.

Jackson has a crooked, cynical smile and a slouched posture. He slopes languidly about with a hint of self-confident swagger.

Lloyd Gorman plays Jackson.

Sally

Sally, is a young neighbour and friend of Emily’s. She is slight in build, and her slender face features small, mousy eyes beneath thick dark brows and a fair complexion. Her dark blonde hair is partially tied back and falls in wavy curls around her narrow shoulders, which are wrapped in a tasselled blue and red shawl. Her dress is a pale mauve and her apron navy blue, descending to just above her dark grey stockings, showing just a sliver of her pale shins.

Lucy Keirl plays Sally.

**Act 2**

At the outset of act 2, we return to the lives of the Tallentires. Many years have passed, - it is now 1914, and they have two children on the cusp of adulthood.

May

May is the eldest of the two, aged nearly 16, with a fair complexion and smooth, porcelain skin. Her long, sleek wavy black hair is worn partially tied back, falling down her back. Her heart-shaped, fresh, youthful face boasts round, glistening dark eyes and full pink lips.

She has a full bosom and a curvaceous build, clothed in a sleeveless lacy white blouse and a short, dark green jacket. Her ankle length satin skirt is a lighter, grassier green and is held up by a thick leather belt. It is light and breezy and floats gracefully about after her as she moves.

Lara Lewis plays May.

Harry

Harry Tallentire is younger than his sister, but not by much – he has the tall stature and lean, even gangly build often typical of late adolescence . His curly brown hair is clipped short and neat around the back and sides, emphasising his babyface – with its chubby, rosy cheeks, snub nose and round, protruding ears.

He wears his waistcoat – a dusty wine-red, and beige satin on the back – open over his white shirt, with the sleeves rolled up. His plain trousers are a slate grey and his polished boots black.

James William-Pattinson plays Harry.