



Synopsis

It's 1917 and the Third Battle of Ypres at Passchendaele is reaching its bloody conclusion. Will, Robbie and Jumbo are three teenage friends from Sunderland who have recently been conscripted into the army. Back home they were part of the church choir and have a deep love of singing.

Will has recently been promoted to Lance Corporal and all three have been moved from the frontline trenches to an observation post, which offers a marginally higher level of safety and comfort. The play starts with Robbie and Jumbo singing to celebrate their new posting, which attracts enemy attention and immediate shelling. It transpires that this shelling leads to the death of a fellow British soldier and the boys are blamed for the killing. They are told that they will be court-martialled, which could result in them facing a firing squad. At this point they are given a choice: to face a court martial or to sing again and attract enemy fire away from the front line of an imminent assault on German lines.

Will, the practical protector of the three friends, realises that singing is the only course they can take to avoid a court-martial and also have a slim chance of survival. In order to convince Robbie and Jumbo, he fabricates the advantage of officers being present at the attack who will believe that the boys have bravely volunteered to be a decoy. He continues to elaborate that this will give them more chance of being returned home as heroes to reward their courage. This new prospect of going home persuades Robbie and Jumbo and they agree to go along with the plan.

As the boys rehearse their singing, they begin to reminisce about home and how they started to sing together for the love of it. Jumbo reminds them of their first song they sung, his favourite: Parting Glass. They sing it which stirs their emotions and homesickness but it disturbs Jumbo they most. Jumbo continues to struggle to sing and Will becomes increasingly concerned that Jumbo's deepening despair will lead him to desert. Will shares

his concerns with Robbie which sparks an argument between them that reveals a rift between the two friends. Robbie is angry that Will has volunteered to be part of a firing squad and believes he has done this for promotion and material gain. In doing this deed, Will has also broken their friendship pledge which has become sacred to Jumbo; nae killing, only singing and we all go home together. As claim and counter-claim fly, they come to an uneasy truce and agree to watch over Jumbo in shifts. At this point, Will leaves for “extra duty”, leaving Robbie to watch over Jumbo.

When Will returns, Jumbo is alone; he is in a state and admits that he is unable to sing despite the threat of the court martial – he feels that singing opens up something inside him that he can’t control. He is ashamed at his weakness and grateful for Will’s protection and friendship. Will tries to cheer him up with a tin of ham been given as a reward for his “extra duty”. Robbie returns, angry at the information he has been given by the Sergeant Major; Will has lied about officers wanting to hear them sing and he has acquired a transfer from the front line to a posting in the HQ offices, leaving Will and Robbie to their fate in the trenches. Will insists that although this is true, his plan is to use the posting to get them off the front line and then get all of them home. In the heat of his anger Robbie forces Will to tell Jumbo that he has been part of a firing squad and breaking their pledge. This news shakes Jumbo out of his quiet shame and provokes his contempt and fury at Will. The three friends begin to tear themselves apart.

Without the hope offered by the pledge and hit by the hard realisation that they won’t make it home, Jumbo swiftly resolves himself to death. He wants to walk into the crossfire, cigarette in mouth – but is wrestled to the ground by Will. Struggling, Will calls for Robbie who wakes up from sleeping and they manage to hold him down. At that moment, there is a gas attack and as the gas is released, the boys scramble for their gas masks. Pre-occupied with their own safety, Will and Robbie neglect to notice that Jumbo has not taken out his gas mask but instead stands and inhales the gas. They rush to him, but he fends them off and dies.

In the final scene, the two boys are waiting for the three-whistle signal which marks the start of the assault. It is also their cue to sing and attract enemy bombs. As they wait, they write a letter to Jumbo’s mother. The first whistle is heard and Will asks if he is a good man; a boy desperate for some redemption in the face of death. Robbie gets anxious that they will miss their cue. The second whistle comes and Will takes off his gun and helmet, deciding that he will not follow orders as they will not be going home together. The third whistle comes, their cue. Will stays stoically silent as Robbie get more anxious. As the bombs begin to fall on the advancing front line, Will asks Robbie not to leave him, not to die alone. Robbie acquiesces and they find some peace in their reconciliation. Although they will not survive, they won’t be alone and not be responsible for further killing in the war. They repeat Jumbo’s pledge and start to sing Jumbo’s favourite song, Parting Glass, as the bombs begin to fall.

Character Breakdown

The three young male characters come from Sunderland in North East England and are conscripted to the Durham Light Infantry. They are all aged between 17 – 19 years old.

Will

A pragmatic young man who is looking to protect himself and his friends from the front line. He is willing to compromise his morality if it will mean the gain of advantages and safety. He plays by the rules and takes any opportunity he can see to improve the chances of survival. He is loyal, grounded and rational. He is under immense pressure in the play to stay measured and collected but there is always a danger that he will break apart and reveal his anger and vulnerability.

Robbie

A dreamer that wears his heart on his sleeve. Demoralised by the futility of war, he escapes from the discomfort and terror of the trenches with jokes, quips and a love of singing. He dreams of fame and celebrity and a utopian life after the war. His character is vibrant and full of possibility with a light, sparky energy. He is uncompromising, unrealistic and transparent.

Jumbo

He is the lost soul of the play. He is tortured by the idea of killing another person and simply wants all the fighting to stop. Increasingly on the edge, he is losing his battle for survival and sanity. He is a soft and simple character that has usually followed the crowd: unremarkable despite his size. However, he has the capacity to be stubborn and single minded and will follow his own path to retain his sense of self, whatever the consequences.