

Opera | Sunderland



THE SOLDIER'S RETURN



Composed by
Marcos Fernandez-Barrero

Libretto by
Jacob Polley

Commissioned by
Opera Sunderland in 2018



Welcome

from Alison Barton, Artistic Director

Welcome to 'The Soldier's Return' by Marcos Fernandez-Barrero and Jacob Polley.

This has been the strangest of years for us all.

At Opera Sunderland we were just on the point of going into weekly rehearsals with our community chorus when lockdown arrived in March. After a short period of 'dazed stasis', we decided rapidly to scope out the logistics of making our opera into a socially distanced film.

Opera is not naturally a socially distanced medium. Quite the reverse in fact, and we had to configure how to rehearse and support individual orchestral players, chorus and cast members and our creative team through the processes of preparation, rehearsal and performance. Once this had been thought through, systems had been devised, operational conversations had with our delivery partners, and relevant schedules and processes (and additional risk assessments!) had been drawn up, we 'jumped in' wholeheartedly. Thankfully everyone on our teams did too, and I couldn't be prouder of the courage, confidence and willingness shown by every individual concerned. They say that peoples' additional strengths come to the fore when the going gets tough. The strengths shown and shared by the Opera Sunderland folk have been legion.

Of course, no production is complete without an audience. I really hope that you will enjoy watching our film and recommending it to your friends. One unexpected advantage of producing a film is that the audience capacity is potentially limitless, and travel to the venue is not an issue, so I hope to hear that this film has reached far and wide. Thank you for providing the last 'piece in our jigsaw' and I hope you enjoy the show.

The Commission

The Soldier's Return was commissioned in 2018 in response to the centenaries of the ending of WW1 and the world premiere of 'The Soldier's Tale' by Stravinsky (which unusually, had its UK premiere in Newcastle). Stravinsky's work, which does not contain singing, exploits the Faust myth. In it the eponymous soldier finds himself deceived by the devil so that when he returns home, he finds that everything has changed in his world, and he feels like a stranger.

We began our commissioning process by speaking to some present-day veterans of military conflict of different ages and reviewing some archived testament from earlier campaigns. We wanted to explore the process of coming home, and what that experience was like.

Our contributors were very generous and gave us a real sense of how it was for them. As we digested the material, we realised that the theme throughout the live and archived stories had the same message: on coming home, the soldiers felt like everything had changed in their world, and they felt like strangers.

They described the bond of understanding that could only fully be felt with other military personnel who had been through similar experiences.

Poet Jacob Polley took the material from the interviews and rephrased, distilled and rearranged it into a narrative that could repeatedly move backwards in time, return to the present, and reflect the mental situation described by the veterans of 'being elsewhere' even when they're home.

Jacob describes the central figure (The Man) as 'a father, a husband, a son; a man from several ages, several conflicts.' The Woman, he describes as 'a mother, a wife, a daughter; a woman from several ages, dealing with the return of a father, husband, son'.

Two (male, military) voices also populate the work, whose identities remain deliberately ambiguous. It is not made clear whether these characters are alive or dead. Whether they were personally known to The Man or remain archetypal.

Composer Marcos Fernandez-Barrero was tasked with composing a one act work exploiting the same orchestral forces as Stravinsky's 'A Soldier's Tale' (7 virtuoso players). On reading Jacob Polley's libretto, he decided to add a vibraphone to the percussion section, which has increased the effectiveness of the orchestration to describe fully the internal world of The Man.

Marcos effectively evokes the multi-layered thought processes and memories of The Man in a polytonal score, which describes the sound of distant grenades, helicopters in flight, the sensation of travelling in the back of a Bedford Van, and other sensory experiences from the field of battle. These are set against a recurring motif characterised by a minor third, representing home, around which the final scene settles.

The chorus in this work performs the function of a 'Greek chorus' - reflecting and echoing the thoughts of The Man, The Woman, and the Military Voices throughout the work in a textural, atmospheric way, to evoke the sense of time and place in each scene.

The 'dialogue' between The Man and The Woman never fully connects as conversation, reflecting the sense of disconnectedness felt by The Man, that of frustration felt by The Woman, and the sense of isolation felt by them both.

The two military voices populate The Man's thoughts and memories in dignified counterpoint - sometimes echoing The Man's own thoughts - often voicing fragments of anecdote or memory, whose origins are never revealed.

Only when The Man has come to the end of his recollections and intrusive thoughts in the final scene, do the voices join with that of The Woman.



The Production

Once we realised that being in the same room together in groups was not going to be possible for the foreseeable future, and we had decided to reconfigure the production as a film, we formed a partnership with award-winning film production company Meerkat Films in Newcastle.

Before we could begin filming however, we needed to create a definitive reading of the piece as a sound track, around which to work. Accordingly, we made a partnership with Ian Stephenson of Simpson Street Studios.

Marco Romano, our musical director then supported each member of the orchestra and cast in Zoom sessions as they prepared their work to a click-track and a recording of the score in piano reduction (played by Alison Gill) before each player then individually travelled to Simpson Street Studios to lay down their recording in a totally socially distanced process.

Meanwhile, our chorus master (Simon Davies-Fidler) prepared our chorus in their own homes during weekly zoom sessions, after which each chorus member would record their contribution on their phone, and send them in to be included in the soundtrack.

While the soundtrack was being made, Meerkat Films was hard at work with our director Annie Rigby and our production designer Imogen Cloët.

Annie and Imogen had always wanted the production to feel intimate for its audience. Working in film was a big step, but that principle felt important to hold onto. They started experimenting with how projection of archive military footage and the voices of the other veterans could flood the space and represent the inner world of The Man.

In developing the production, Annie and Imogen also kept returning to librettist Jacob Polley's description of the Man and the Woman's world: a domestic setting that was being disrupted by military memories. Imogen wove this into her design with military objects and fabrics increasingly disrupting the living room where the Man and Woman are seen. This gave an exciting and sometimes unnerving theatricality as the piece unfolded and the disruption became more and more severe.

The back cloth pulled taught by guide ropes suggests both home and away, permanence and transience, being the shape of both a house and a field tent.

An armchair upholstered in old army canvas, camouflage netting spilling out from a cupboard, multiple army shirts and radios spreading out across the stage- all these gave an unsettling sense of the domestic space being overtaken by this 'other' space- of memory, military and what is happening mentally, the 'elsewhere'.

Ultimately, it was a massive experiment. When all the elements finally came together for 3 days of filming it was brilliant to see how the projection and the design world brought the piece to life. What was just as extraordinary was Ian, Katherine, Austin and Andri's performances which tell the emotional story of The Soldier's Return so sensitively and powerfully.



‘Synopsis’

‘Man’ – the central character ‘a father, husband, son: a man from several ages, several conflicts’ – has returned home. He has wanted only to come home ever since he first went away on his tour of duty. Now that he is back, all he can think about is being with his regiment again, and with his comrades. He knows they are the only ones who will understand how complicated his feelings are.

Although he is now safe at home, he keeps remembering what happened in all the different places he has been – how scared he felt – how tired – how much the little things meant to him, like being able to listen to the radio...and how much the big things meant- like surviving attack, and the bond with his fellow soldiers.

It will take him time to re-adjust to being back, and to begin to feel at home again.





Jacob Polley

Jacob Polley was born and grew up in Cumbria. His fourth book of poems, *Jackself*, won the 2016 T.S. Eliot Prize for poetry, the judges describing it as ‘a firework of a book; inventive, exciting and outstanding in its imaginative range and depth of feeling.’ His three previous books of poems, *The Brink* (2003), *Little Gods* (2006) and *The Havocs* (2012), are all published by Picador, UK. Both *The Brink* and *The Havocs* were shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize, and *The Havocs* won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize. Jacob’s first novel, *Talk of the Town*, a fiercely demotic coming-of-age murder mystery, won the 2010 Somerset Maugham Award.

Jacob lives in the North East and is Professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University.

Marcos Fernandez-Barrero



Born in Barcelona, he studied at ESMUC, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the Royal College of Music. Marcos founded the Theory & Composition course at the Trinity Music Academy in London and is currently teaching at the Conservatoire of Barcelona. Winner of more than twenty musical awards, his works have been played by professional orchestras around the World and he has been “the most played modern composer in the Spanish symphonic halls since 2018” after winning the prestigious AEOS-Fundación BBVA award. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Following the success of his first Opera ‘Noctum’, he collaborated with author and librettist David Almond to produce his second opera ‘Miracle!’ for Opera Sunderland.



Marco Romano

Marco originally trained as a clarinettist at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama before turning to conducting full-time. He subsequently went on to study with George Hurst, and to work closely with and understudy Walter Weller, Neeme Jarvi and Sir Alexander Gibson. He was the founder and first Musical Director of the Glasgow Sinfonia and is currently the Musical Director of Opera Sunderland and an associate conductor with the Ravel Philharmonic Orchestra of Bergamo.

Marco made his professional debut with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. In 1996, he became the Artistic and Musical Director of the Sunderland Empire Theatre's Promenade Concert Series. Since then he has gone on to appear with many orchestras including the Halle, Royal Northern Sinfonia, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Birmingham Philharmonic and Liverpool Mozart Orchestras, and the Orchestras of Scottish Opera and Opera North. He has also worked with many distinguished soloists including Julian Lloyd Webber, Sarah Walker, Dennis O'Neill, John Wallace, Tasmin Little and Lesley Garrett.

As Musical Director of Opera Sunderland, Marco was part of the commissioning team which developed 'Miracle', an Opera of Two Halves. He subsequently conducted the world premiere performances of what became a multi-award-winning production. Marco was also part of the commissioning team which developed 'The Soldier's Return'.



Annie Rigby

Annie is founder and Artistic Director of Unfolding Theatre. She has directed the company's award-winning productions including Hold On Let Go, Putting The Band Back Together, Lands of Glass, Best in the World and Building Palaces. Commissions also include directing Lord of the Flies for Gala Theatre Durham, Miracle! For Opera Sunderland, Honky Tonk Women for Sage Gateshead and Northumbrian Voices with Kathryn Tickell.

Annie was Resident Director at Northern Stage (2003-08). Productions including On Top of the Town, performed at Noordenzon Festival in The Netherlands, Tattercoats, Thumbelina and The Golden Bird.

Annie was Northern Rock Foundation Fellow (2007-08) on the Clore Leadership Programme.



Imogen Cloët

Imogen is an award-winning designer and visual artist based in Newcastle who has worked nationally in site specific installation, theatre and film. Over the past decade Imogen has created a body of work that responds directly to heritage spaces and their collections, as well as designing for theatre and events. Imogen has worked with a broad range of cultural institutions and organisations including: National Trust, English Heritage, Channel 4 Films, BBC, Arts & Heritage, Opera North, Battersea Arts Centre, Unfolding Theatre, Northern Stage, Bath Theatre Royal, November Club, The Gate Theatre, Northumbria University, Enchanted Parks, EAT Festival and Design Event.

Imogen was a recent winner of the People's Choice award for her proposal for Blue Sky Museums and has been nominated for a number of prestigious design awards including the Barclays Stage Award, the Arts Foundation Sceneography Award and was a recipient of The Jerwood Foundation's Young Designer Award and the Arts Council Theatre Design award.

Meerkat Films

Are an award winning TV and film production company. They work across a range of genres including drama and documentary and have a vibrant portfolio spanning more than a decade. Based in a Grade II listed cottage on the Quayside. They have a state-of-the-art editing suite as well as offices. The 50 seat Side Cinema is next door, where they can share their latest creations with cast and crew.



Simpson Street Studios

Founded by renowned folk musician producer Ian Stephenson in 2014, it has attracted such clients as Sony Pictures (2016 The Magnificent Seven Soundtrack), BBC Radio 4 (Playing the Skyline 2016), BBC Choir of the Year “Voices of Hope”, Kathryn Tickell, Alistair Anderson, Rachel Hamer and Luke Daniels among many others.

The Northumberland Studio Complex is a new partnership in association with Coquetdale Music Trust. It is a large and flexible building housing a huge live room, a 200+ sqm space with floating floor, acoustic treatment and soundproofing. Underfloor heating throughout, two isolation booths (one with high vaulted ceiling) with sightlines and a kitchen and common room area. With natural light throughout, it also features a beautiful Yamaha C3 grand piano.



CAST

Ian Priestley	baritone	(The Man)
Katherine Aitken	mezzo-soprano	(The Woman)
Austin Gunn	tenor	(Voice 1)
Andri Björn Róbertsson	bass-baritone	(Voice 2)



Ian Priestley studied voice at Guildhall School of Music and Drama. He toured with the D'Oyly Carte and Carl Rosa opera companies and has appeared at the Buxton International Festival. Ian has also sung with Welsh National Opera, notably in their award-winning production of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and at the Savonlinna Festival in Finland, the Dutch Nationale Reisopera, Scottish Opera, Opera North, The Royal Opera House, as well as solo recitals with the London Mozart Players. In 2015 he played the roles of God and Larry Trench in Opera Sunderland's award-winning production, *Miracle!*



Katherine Aitken is a Samling Artist and graduate of the Royal College of Music and Royal Academy of Music, London where she sung roles including Cherubino in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and La Ciesca in Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*. Katherine's recent highlights include Charles Grey (*Georgiana* compiled by Mark Tatlow) for Buxton Opera Festival, *Witness 2/Singer 2/Woman 2* (*Lessons in Love and Violence* by George Benjamin), *Tisbe* (*La Cenerentola* by Rossini) and *Pippetto* (*Donizetti's Viva la Mamma!*) for Opéra de Lyon, *Pippetto* (*Donizetti's Viva la Mamma!*) for Grand Théâtre de Genève, *Tisbe* (*La Cenerentola* by Rossini) in the Edinburgh International Festival and *Cherubino* (*The Marriage of Figaro* by Mozart) for English Touring Opera. Katherine also recently premiered the role of *Wild Woman* in *Aurora* by Noah Moseley with Bury Court Opera and the Grimeborn Festival.



Austin Gunn has worked with English National Opera, Scottish Opera, Loughborough Festival Opera, Berwick Festival Opera, Edinburgh International Festival and many others. He made his Portuguese debut in 2017 in the *Musica Na Fabrica* Festival in Lisbon directed by Max Hoehn, and his Swiss debut in 2018 as the spectre in Dvorak's *The Spectre's Bride* in Zurich. He has appeared in concert in France, Switzerland, Italy, Sweden and throughout the UK.



Andri Björn Róbertsson made his house operatic debut in the 2019/20 season with his native Icelandic Opera as Figaro in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* and returned to the Dutch Opera as *Der Einäugige* in *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*. Last season, Andri appeared at both the Staatsoper Hamburg and Opera National de Lyon with Sir George Benjamin's *Lessons in Love and Violence* following his house debut at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden with the world premiere of the same production. Andri studied at the Royal Academy of Music and National Opera Studio and was nominated 'Brightest Hope in Classical Music' at the 2013 Icelandic Music Awards. Andri was a Harewood Arist at English National Opera and a member of Zürich Opera's International Opera Studio. Andri's multiple awards include the First Prize at the Mozart Singing Competition in London and first prize in the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra and Icelandic Academy of Arts Competition. Concert appearances include *Christus* (Bach's *St Matthew Passion*) with Newcastle Bach Choir at Sage, Gateshead, and recitals at Wigmore Hall and Oxford Lieder Festival.

ORCHESTRA

Violin:	Vince Flemming
Double Bass:	Duncan Brown
Clarinet:	Rachael Chesney
Bassoon:	Sharon Clatworthy
Trumpet:	Anthony Thompson
Trombone:	Stuart Gray
Percussion:	Mark Edwards

CHORUS

Mark Anyan, Janie Banks, Lindsay Benton, Gill Blazey, Judith Burford, Caroline Comer, Irene Donaldson, Thomas Donnelly, Deborah Doyle, Jaene Fitzgerald, Michelle Hudson, Anna Knighton, Janette Lawson, Evan Maddison, Anthony McDermott, Leon McGuinness, Sabena Monk, Sandra Naglis, Sarah O'Neil, Gloria Oxnard-Watson, Bonnie Shaw, Nicola Sugden, Aileen Sullivan, Olavia Taylor, Mary Winetroube.

CREATIVE TEAM

Artistic Director: **Alison Barton**
Musical Director: **Marco Romano**
Stage Director: **Annie Rigby**
Production Designer: **Imogen Clöet**
Producer: **Sue Hurrell**
Project Co-ordinator: **Sam Burgess**
Chorus Master: **Simon Davies-Fidler**
Repetiteur: **Alison Gill**

PRODUCTION TEAM

Set Construction: **Simon Henderson**
Wardrobe: **Lou Duffy**
Lighting and
Technical support: **James Froment**
Lighting Operator: **Jess Avery**
Soundtrack recorded at: **Simpson Street Studios**
Soundtrack recording
and dubbing: **Ian Stephenson**

FILM PRODUCED BY MEERKAT FILMS

Associate Producer: **Magnus Dennison**
Film Editor: **Katja Roberts**
Camera Operators: **Adam Opie, Ross Marshall, Tian Abrie**
Grip: **Nat Dwyer**
Subtitles: **Peter Sullivan**
Filmed at: **Dance City and Alphabetti Theatre Newcastle**

Stills Photographer: **Mark Savage**
Press: **Helen Fussell**
Graphic Design: **Tommy Anderson, Baseline Shift**

THANKS

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Those veterans we interviewed and whose words were incorporated into the libretto. Those who wished to be named and those who wished to be anonymous.

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