We're in the enormous Nekkerhal in Mechelen near Antwerp. Soldiers come at us from the depths of the mists (since stage is as big as two football pitches that's really how it feels). They are enduring an unearthly, cacophony of explosions in a battle such as one might experience on a film set to a similar scale to that of the Lord of the Rings. 14-18 is a huge majestic and inspirational musical that, like the war it represents, wrings out every emotion, not least because you feel for the people involved. Music and song, words and lyrics, context and characterisation combine to raise the hairs on the back of your neck. You acknowledge the beauty of the set whilst simultaneously wondering anew at the atrocity of war, marvelling at the imagination of those who created it and wishing, really wishing, that this fiction had no basis in fact.

The musical features four best friends who are mobilised on 28th July 1914 when the Great War breaks out. Thoughtful Jan, his younger brother Kamiel, his best friend Fons and headstrong Albert are, like everyone else, convinced that the hostilities will be short-lived. The musical takes you through their experience as the war drags on and they discover that it is far more brutal than they could possibly have imagined. Jan yearns to see his son and wife Anna, Kamiel is terrified of any form of violence and Fons shows a softer side when he falls for a pretty nurse called Celine. What follows, a heroic battle for survival, is tackled by the friends with humour, hope and unconditional friendship, and their experiences become a story-in-miniature of the Great War.

The word 'spectacular' doesn't begin to do it justice. There are 115 performers in all (three groups of 15 children spell each other in and out), eleven wifi-operated laser-driven platforms, 1225 lamps, 3 km of bridges from which the lights and effects are ranged and 350 specially made and historically accurate costumes. It took three years to convert the Nekkerhal which, originally made for fairs and huge markets, is about the size of London's ExCeL. 1,500 square meters of seating moves the audience into and out of the action, providing a monumentally immersive experience as you find yourself moving towards the action or away from the well simulated war, and well planned choreography means that the 115 performers sometimes seem far more.

I met actors Danny Whitehead and Kayleigh McKnight with Company Manager Tijl Dauwe for a snack on the day they were to see the Flemish production the very first time. Already excited, it seemed that the immensity of the venue had inspired them further. Gesturing around to indicate the immensity of the venue Kayleigh; who plays Anna in the musical, told me; "We have been rehearsing for a while but not here. They told me it was a spectacular but I had no idea it would be like this" Danny added; "There are thirty of us [English language actors] in town rehearsing. It's a big cast, with a hundred people on stage and forty-five kids in three groups of fifteen. Just with those numbers you know it's going to be big, but even trying to grasp that fully is difficult before you come here and see." Tijl added; "We wanted to get good people here for the English because there is nothing worse than hearing your own language with a different accent or intonations you wouldn't use. It's important to get it right. For us [Studio 100] we have to pass on knowledge of the Great War. In Belgium it is the forgotten war, when we talk of wars we think of World War II because we have grandparents who lived then. But it is important that our children understand. So the ethos of Studio 100; truth, family values and integrity is part of the production and what we want to convey."

Writing features like this is tricky. Too many superlatives can turn people off. When the superlatives are clichés it also sounds corny, but I this production really did blow me away. It's huge, heart-warming, inspiring and sad. Whenever I describe the 'silent night' scene (which I won't discuss, to avoid any spoilers) I end up crying and I really want to see it again.

Don’t get turned off by my superlatives, clichés are clichés because sometimes they’re true. Go and see it for yourself.

Boxout

14-18 is a multilingual production aimed at an international audience. It launched in Flemish Dutch and while it isn’t necessary to understand the words to understand what is going on, the English language version starts on May 22nd. If staying in Mechelin you might also like to try the excellent local white beer in a brewery tour and visit the local war museum.

Boxout

14-18 is a collaboration between Belgium’s Studio100, director and Olivier Award nominee Frank Van Laecke, script writer and Flemish Musical Award winner Allard Blom. Music is played by the Royal Flemish Philarmonic Orchestra. English actors are Seffan Harri as Jan, Kayleigh McKnight as Anna, Jonathan Broderick as Kamiel, Danny Whitehead as Fons, Andrew Ryan as Dedecker and Sarah Dungworth as Celine.