



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Danny Whitehead who plays Fons, Kayleigh McKnight who plays Anna and Tijl Dauwe, Assistant Director and Company Manager.

action or away from the well simulated war. The performance is choreographed in such a way that the 115 performers sometimes seem far more.

I met actors Danny Whitehead and Kayleigh McKnight, together with Company Manager Tijl Dauwe for a snack on the day they were to see the Flemish production for the very first time. After the success of the Flemish language version, it was only a matter of time before the English version, catering to international guests, would be staged. With anticipation rife, it seemed that the immensity of the venue played a part in inspiring them. Gesturing around to indicate this vastness, 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." Tijl explains their choice of using English actors: "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. Hence the ethos of Studio 100; truth, family values and integrity are part of the production and what we want to convey."

Writing things like this is tricky. Too many superlatives can turn people off. When the superlatives are also clichés, it could also sound corny, but I have to say this production really did blow me away. It's huge, heart-warming, inspiring and very sad. Trying to describe the 'silent night' scene (which I won't tell you to avoid any spoilers), leaves me in tears and I would never turn down a second opportunity to see 14-18 again. Don't let the superlatives turn you away, clichés are clichés because sometimes they're true. Go and see it for yourself.

ABOVE MIDDLE: The Silent Night scene; all nations join to celebrate Christmas.

14-18 is a multilingual production aimed at an international audience. It was launched in Flemish Dutch and while it isn't strictly necessary to understand the words, the English language version does start on 22 May 2014. For visitors who choose to stay in Mechelen, there's excellent local white beer to be tasted on a brewery tour and a visit to the local war museum comes highly recommended.

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 Philharmonic 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.



Panic as the bombs drop.