

A century has passed

We're in the enormous Nekkerhal in Mechelen, near Antwerp. Soldiers come at us from the depths of the mists (with a stage as big as two football pitches this is an experience that needs to be seen to be believed). Enduring an unearthly cacophony of explosions, this is a staged battle akin to being on a film set, somewhere on the scale of the Lord of the Rings. 14-18 is a huge majestic and inspirational musical that, like the war it represents, wrings every emotion. The word 'spectacular' doesn't begin to do it justice.

TEXT & PHOTOS: CAROLE EDRICH

Music and song, words and lyrics, the tale woven causes the hairs on the back of your neck to raise. You acknowledge the beauty of the set at the same time as you wonder anew at the atrocity of war, marvel at the imagination of those who created it and wish, really wish, that this fiction was not based on fact.

The musical features four best friends who are mobilised on 28th July 1914 as the Great War breaks out. Thoughtful Jan, his younger brother Kamiel, his best friend Fons and headstrong Albert, like the rest of the population, are convinced that the hostilities will be short-lived, and the musical accompanies their experience as the war drags on and they discover that this is a war far more brutal than they could possibly have imagined. Jan yearns to see his son and his 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 as a whole.

There are 115 performers in all (three groups of 15 children spell each other in and out), eleven wifi-operated laser-driven platforms, 1,225 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 It took three years to convert the spacious Nekkerhal, which, originally made for fairs and huge markets, is about the size of London's Ex-CeL. 1,500 sqm of seating propels the audience into and out of the action, providing a monumentally immersive experience as you find yourself moving in towards the