

# SASSOON

or

## The Booby-Trapped Idealist

### Synopsis

It is the long hot summer of 1917, the Great War drags on, and Lieutenant Siegfried Sassoon, war poet and wounded hero, loudly declares that he has finished with fighting. Read out in the House of Commons and published in *The Times*, Sassoon's famous protest stands alongside his poetry as one man's expression of war's inhumanity. But, of course, he is not alone in his desire to stop the war.

In London's National Hospital, another man is protesting. Unlike Sassoon, Private Davies is not treated with quite the same leniency. And with good reason. He is not of the same class. But there is a better reason why his protest goes unheard and unpublicized. Davies has decided, quite literally, to shut up. In marked contrast to Sassoon's voluble stop-the-war protest, the young private has chosen silence.

What both men do have in common is shellshock. This new and vastly misunderstood condition was greeted by many as little more than cowardice. Sassoon and Davies's 'cure' at the hands of the military psychiatrists is brutal and benign by turns. Apart from providing a dramatic illustration of their class differences, their treatment also exposes the values of a society that would rather let the slaughter continue than accept a negotiated peace with Germany. In fact, to a belligerent British public, nothing short of total victory can vindicate the sacrifice of so many of the empire's youth, and anyone who dares criticize the war is branded a traitor.

One such traitorous minority are the pacifists, or 'pasty-faces'. Victimized by the authorities, despised by the public, and vilified in the press, the pacifists are quick to grasp the propaganda value of Sassoon's protest, and lose no time in wooing him to their cause. After all, if a military hero is saying the war has to stop, surely their cause is just!

Fellow officer and poet, Robert Graves, whose friendship with Sassoon is the central relationship of the play, believes that Sassoon is too shellshocked to play the martyr to anyone's cause, least of all the hated pacifists. As he struggles to free Sassoon from their influence, he clashes with Bertrand Russell, a leading pacifist of the day. In the war between Graves and the 'pasty-faces', Russell proves even more unscrupulous than the military authorities in their attempts to silence the young poet.

Unfortunately, Sassoon is adept at silencing himself. Not for nothing is he characterized by Graves as the 'booby-trapped idealist'. Swinging between 'bitter pacifist' and 'happy warrior', he succeeds in sabotaging his own protest, and grudgingly accepts his doctor's diagnosis that he is suffering from an 'anti-war complex'. Private Davies, on recovering from his bout of shellshock, exchanges a hospital ward for a prison cell. Ironically, he 'finds' his voice as Sassoon 'loses' his. There is further irony in that Sassoon, in his protest, claimed to speak 'on behalf' of the common soldier. Men like Private Davies, in fact.

Awaiting court-martial, Davies is visited by Sassoon, on his way back to the battlefield to 'look after some men'. A comforting rationalization that allows him to overlook his failure to carry his protest to its logical conclusion. Davies is a living example of the fate that could well have been his. The irony is not lost on Sassoon. Davies stands, virtually naked, in a freezing cell, the uniform that he resolutely refuses to put on neatly folded at his feet; the very image of a prisoner of conscience, now as then. Davies's hastily-scribbled plea to Sassoon is worthy of Gandhi: "Why don't we all just say no?"

It is a question that the play attempts to answer.