

High SHERRIFF

Half a century after his death, an acclaimed Surrey playwright is back on the local stage.

Anna Johnson salutes the prolific scribe

It was 50 years ago this month that Robert Cedric Sherriff, the man who put Kingston and Esher firmly on the literary map, passed away in his Kingston Hospital bed. Now, to mark the anniversary, theatre director Claire Evans – in association with the RC Sherriff Trust, the local arts charity that bears his name – is dusting down one of his most thought-provoking plays for performance on the Elmbridge stage.

Pound to a penny, however, it is not the one you expect. Written in 1950, and later made into a popular film with Ralph Richardson in the starring role, *Home at Seven* is a tense affair set five years after the end of World War II. It portrays the psychological turmoil of David Preston, a mild-mannered bank clerk who finds that he cannot recall the events of the previous day – 24 hours in which a murder has occurred, for which Preston now believes himself the culprit.

"It has a lot of layers," explains Claire. "It's a mystery drama, but it's also a response to the aftermath of the Second World War – the stolen time and its effects on people five years on. This is a good moment to revive the play, as we find ourselves in a somewhat similar position: five years after 2020 and the traumas of Covid-19."

Of course, it was the legacy of another, earlier conflagration – the one with mud and gas and trenches that brought the optimistic Long Nineteenth Century to a halt – which provided the fuel for Sherriff's most famous literary fire.

Born in 1896, raised in Hampton Wick and educated at Kingston Grammar School, Sherriff served as an officer in the East Surrey Regiment, seeing action at Vimy Ridge and Loos, before returning home wounded from Passchendaele in 1917. For the next 10 years he worked quietly as an insurance adjuster. But on December 9, 1928, with 21-year-old Laurence Olivier in the lead, his seventh play was premiered at the Apollo Theatre, London. It was *Journey's End*.



The performance went down a storm. Here, in this nerve-shredding tale of mental disintegration and despair, set in the British trenches on the eve of the German Spring Offensive in March 1918, the half-buried nightmares of a whole generation arose from their shallow graves.

A decade on from the Armistice, those who had endured the horror were still struggling to express to friends, family and society at large how their sojourn in Hades had been. *Journey's End* gave voice to their pain. It ran

for two years on the London stage, saw productions in a variety of languages – everywhere from Canada to Madrid – and has been revived many times since.

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Following a three-week run at The Tabard Theatre in Chiswick (Sept 2-20), *Home at Seven* will play at:

- Sat Sept 27, Vera Fletcher Hall, Thames Ditton
- Mon Sept 29, The Barn Theatre Club, West Molesey
- Wed Oct 1 and Thurs Oct 2, Riverhouse Barn, Walton
- Fri Oct 3, Michael Frayn Theatre, Kingston

■ Tickets £20; see all booking links at verafletcherhall.co.uk

Sherriff himself went on to produce a steady stream of novels, further plays and film scripts, including *The Dam Busters*, *The Four Feathers*, *The Invisible Man* and *Goodbye, Mr Chips*.

A lifelong bachelor, he used his earnings from *Journey's End* to purchase Rosebriars, the five-bedroom Esher home where he lived with his mother until her passing in 1965, and then alone until his own death a decade later. In his will he bequeathed the house to the newly formed Elmbridge Borough Council, asking that it be used to fund the arts. From the proceeds of sale the council set up the Rosebriars Trust for precisely that purpose, renaming it the RC Sherriff Trust in 2004. The house itself was demolished in the 1990s.

One day in 1967, when the tide of theatrical fashion had ebbed considerably for Sherriff and his kind, an old lady approached him at a prizegiving ceremony and said how much she had enjoyed *Journey's End*. There was only one thing that puzzled her. Why had he not written anything else?

"That play has certainly dominated his legacy," admits Claire Evans, whose recent directorial credits include Ayckbourn's *Absent Friends* at the OSO in Barnes. "By staging *Home at Seven* we are trying to redress that balance. I think so many people have forgotten how much he actually wrote."

Pop along to your local theatre this month, however, and you will receive just the reminder you need.