

When Winston Went to War With The Wireless

PERFORMANCE DATES

16th - 20th September 2026

A tense, timely new play from Jack Thorne dramatizes a pivotal moment in British history:
the 1926 General Strike.

As the nation's newspapers fall silent, the fledgling British Broadcasting Company finds itself thrust into a new and powerful role as the country's sole source of news. At the heart of the drama are two formidable men with opposing visions for this new medium. There's John Reith, the BBC's fiercely principled and ambitious founder, who is determined to forge an institution founded on the principle of impartiality and Winston Churchill, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, who sees the wireless as a powerful tool for government propaganda.

Thorne's play illuminates the origins of a British institution and explores the timeless question of who controls the narrative in a time of crisis. It's a compelling examination of power, press freedom, and the birth of a media giant.

The structure of the play blends high-minded debates, serious dramatic scenes with light-hearted snippets of variety performances, including music hall acts and comedy sketches. This juxtaposition mirrors the varied content of early radio and requires a cast capable of navigating both dramatic weight and lighter, more entertaining moments at a drop of a hat.
But ultimately everyone is portrayed as very real - they are not caricatures.

For the historical characters: my casting process will focus on finding an ensemble of actors who can capture the core of these figures, prioritizing their ability to embody the characters' presence and internal conflicts over strong resemblances.

AUDITION DETAILS

Friday 8th May 7.00pm & Saturday May 9th 10.00 am

(if you are interested but unable to attend please email Ginny)

This will be workshop based – working in large and small groups

Recalls are likely to be during the day on Saturday 16th & Sunday 17th May when we can work on specific segments of text.

It is not imperative that you have read the script but please ensure you are aware of the themes and overall position of the BBC in 1926 and the impact of the General Strike.

Although you might want to play a particular part I will be looking at auditionees with all parts in mind - as the jigsaw of the 'whole' is crucial to the success of the production.

Please download the Auditions Submission Form from the Maddermarket Theatre website.

Complete and return it as an attachment to ginny.porteous@maddermarket.org

Or contact me with any questions you may have in the first instance.

CHARACTERS

Cast 12+ will portray a total of 34 characters - some of which are 'but a moment'

(please note ages indicated are to show what they would have been in 1926 – it doesn't mean I will religiously stick to it! So please do not assume it rules you out).

MAIN ROLES – *will not double*

John Reith: Director General of the BBC a tortured idealist - tall (*on stage for most of the play*) - 37

Winston Churchill: Chancellor of the Exchequer the scheming showman – shorter than Reith - 52

SUPPORTING ROLES *some will be doubled and / or take on various 'star' turns*

Stanley Baldwin: the wily pragmatist - 59

Peter Eckersley: the moral anchor - 34

Isabel Shields: the guide with a passion for radio (the first female to be appointed at the BBC) - 27

Charlie Bowser: a beautiful young man, a ghost from Reith's past

Muriel Reith: full of thwarted get up and go - 33

Clemmie Churchill: Winston's backstop and equal partner - 41

J.C.C. Davidson: a devious deputy chief civil commissioner - 37

Ernest Bevin: carries the weight of being leader of the Transport & General Workers Union on his shoulders- 45

Arthur Pugh: brow-beaten, overwrought Chair of the TUC's Special Industrial Committee - 56

Amelia Johnson: newsreader, ramrod straight

W. Joynson-Hicks (Jix): traditional Home Secretary - 61

The Archbishop of Canterbury: elderly patrician - 78

Engineer: loyal, supportive and crucial member of the BBC

The other 'STARS' of the Show:

Live Foley sound artists (could be from the ensemble cast or cast specifically for this purpose) This important part of the play involves creating live sound effects to accompany the action, just as they would have been done in a radio studio in the 1920s.

Various other / historical characters to be played by the cast - the list is numerous! e.g. Politicians, entertainers, crowds, union men etc - *a couple of them will need to be able to sing – some will be recorded voices only.*

ADDED BONUS

Musicians / Singers: The addition of live instruments / voices in certain sections - including various Foley moments - is something I would love to at least explore its potential.

Remember not to get too locked into the ages at this stage and be open to playing any of the wonderful characters.

REHEARSALS

The schedule will be set once cast - but could potentially commence w/c 6th July (for some cast members) for some explorative work.

Initially it is likely to be a couple of evenings per week and during the day on a Sunday – this will increase the nearer the performance we get.

But exact schedule to be confirmed during casting.

All of the cast will be required at a number of rehearsals, to help establish the crowd scenes and the overall feel of the production.

If you have any potential issues and want to know if this rules you out (or not) please contact me!