

'Ernest'
Paul Whitfield 2017

ERNEST

By Paul Whitfield



Walter Misson in later life, Ernest's father

Cast

Ernest 1
Ernest 2
Ernest 3
Rose (mother)
Walter (father)
Maud (sister)
Julia (sister)
William (brother)
Foreman
Conductor
Reader 1
Reader 2
Reader 3
Reader 4
Reader 5

Scene 1

The three Ernests run on.

Ernest 1
[To audience]
You're here then.

Ernest 2
[To audience]
About time.

Ernest 3
[To audience]
We've been waiting for you.

Ernest 1
[To audience]
We've been waiting a right long time.

Ernest 2
[To audience]
Flippin' ages.

Ernest 3
[To audience]
Lifetimes.

Ernest 1
[To audience]
So we better get a shift on.

Ernest 2
[To audience]
No time to waste.

Ernest 3
[To audience]
We're always full speed ahead.

Ernest 1
[To audience]

That's us.

Ernest 2
[To audience]
No hanging about.

Ernest 3
[To audience]
Hang on to your hats and off we go!

Ernest 1
[To audience]
Hold on, we should introduce ourselves first.

Ernest 2
[To audience]
Rude not to. Mother would tell us off.

Ernest 3
[To audience]
Sorry, dashing off in a racing hurry again.

Ernest 1
[To audience]
I'm Ernest Misson.

Ernest 2
[To audience]
I'm Ernest Misson.

Ernest 3
[To audience]
I'm Ernest Misson.

Ernest 1
[To Ernests]
They look confused.

Ernest 2

[To Ernests]

Perhaps they're not very bright.

Ernest 3

[To Ernests]

It's possible. Look at them.

[The other family members enter – Rose, Maud, William and Julia]

Ernest 1

[To audience]

We'd better explain.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

You see, Mother used to say...

Rose

He's never still...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Maud used to say...

Maud

He's like a wasp, always buzzing around.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

William used to say...

William

He's like a spinning top. He makes me dizzy.

Rose

I swear he's got enough energy for three.

Maud

I can't keep track of him.

William

You think you know where he is, then he pops up somewhere else.

Rose

He's a Jack-in-the Box. Three Jack-in-the-Boxes!

Ernest 2

[To audience]

That's how Mother saw me.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

And if it's good enough for her...

Ernest 1

[To audience]

It's good enough for you lot too...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

So you see, it's going to take three of us to tell the story.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Ernest's story.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

My family's story.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

The story of the Misson's and the Great War.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

How things were before.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

What the war did to us.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And how things were after.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Never the same.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

But we're not there yet.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

First things first.

Scene 2

Ernest 3

[To audience]

The year is 1913.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

In our house we don't know much about what's happening in the rest of the world.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Why would we care?

Ernest 3

[To audience]

It doesn't affect us.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

And we've got enough things of our own to worry about.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Father worries about what the harvest will be like.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

He works on a farm.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

He looks after the horses. He loves the horses.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

He's already gone to work. He leaves before the sun comes up.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Mother worries about putting a hot meal on the table.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Which she does.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Every day.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Maud and William have left school and started new jobs.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

He's 13 and she's 14.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And they think they're so important.

Maud

Out of the way, wasp, I'm on the way to work.

William

Hop it, titch, I've got an important job to get to.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

But I'm still at school.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

For another year or so.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And it's a three mile walk.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

So I'd better get a move on.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

There's some in my class don't have shoes and do the walk in bare feet...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

But I've got good strong boots.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

They used to be William's.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

There are two very important things I have to take to school with me.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

One is Julia...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

My little sister...

Ernest 1

[To audience]

She's eight.

Julia

Wait for me Ernest!

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And she's far too slow.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

The other thing...

Ernest 1

[To audience]

And it's much more important than Julia...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Is my potato.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

It's got my initials carved in it.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

That's so, when it's baked in the oven at school, come lunchtime, everyone knows
it's mine.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

My mate Albert doesn't always bring a potato.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

His family can't always afford it.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

So if he hasn't got one I share some of mine with him.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

I'm only little.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

I don't need that much to eat.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Thin as a stick and fast as a whippet, that's Ernest Misson.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Then there's a boring day at school...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Before, at last, it's time to head home again.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Sometimes, Julia walks home with her friends.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

I like it when that happens.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Means I can do a high speed journey home.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Have some fun.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

I can run...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

And I run faster than anyone else I know.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Or I can sneak a lift...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

I jump on the back of a horse and cart...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Or even one of the electric trams...

Ernest 1

[To audience]

As long as the conductor isn't looking...

Conductor

Oi, get off, you little...

Ernest 1

[To audience]

My favourite time is at home in the evening...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

When it's dark outside and the lamps are lit...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

When Father's home and we've had us tea.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

And he's told us all about the farm and the horses...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And he gets his guitar out...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Or his mandolin...

Ernest 1

[To audience]

He can't read music...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

He never had a lesson...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

But he can play anything.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Or he sings to Mother to make her laugh...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Like he's Al Jolson his very self...

***Walter sings 'You Made me Love You' to Rose. The children laugh and join in.
Original recorded version comes in and plays over the top to mark scene
change.***

Scene 3

Ernest 1

[To audience]

The year is 1914.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And in the summer the war starts.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

War with Germany.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

What we call the Great War.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

At first, for us, nothing much changes.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

William and Maud still think they're important.

Maud

Out of our way.

William

We're very important.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Julia is just as annoying.

Julia

Ernest, wait for me!

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Mother is still putting food on the table.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

And Father still loves his horses.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

It breaks his heart when he hears how many are being taken to France...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Taken to war.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

But not from his farm.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Not yet.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Big news is I leave school...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

And I get a job...

Ernest 1

[To audience]

As a delivery boy.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Who's important now?

Rose and Ernest, leaving for work.

Rose

Do as you're told and don't answer back.

Ernest

No Mother.

Rose

Don't be home late for your tea.

Ernest

No Mother.

Rose

Try and keep yourself clean.

Ernest

Yes Mother.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

And Dad, of course, sang me off to work...

Walter sings the chorus of "He's A Devil in his Own Home Town." Original recorded version comes in and plays over the top to mark scene change.

Scene 4

Ernest 1

[To audience]

The year is 1916.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

The year when things really begin to change.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

And not for the better.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

The Army needs more men...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And one of those men is my Dad.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Off he goes to join the horses in France.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

And the music leaves the house with him.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

I like being a delivery boy.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

It suits me.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

But now that my Dad's gone I can't be a boy anymore.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

It's time I had a man's job.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

The family needs me to grow up.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

I am fourteen, after all.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

So when I see an advert for a blacksmith's striker job at the Hardy Patent Pick Company...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

I go straight in there...

Foreman

Shouldn't you be at school, titch?

Ernest 1, 2, 3

I'm fourteen.

Foreman

You look more like you're four. Now hop it.

Ernest 1, 2, 3

I've come for the job.

Foreman

What job?

Ernest 1, 2, 3

The blacksmith's striker job.

Foreman

That's a man's job. Go back to playing marbles, son.

Ernest 1, 2, 3

I am a man.

Foreman

Stop wasting my time.

Ernest 1, 2, 3

I'm stronger than I look, and I never get tired. At least give me a try.

Foreman

It'll give me a laugh, I suppose.

Ernest 1, 2, 3

Thank you. You won't regret it.

Foreman

But I think you'll need to stand on a box to reach the anvil!

Ernest 1

[To audience]

So he let me try...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And I showed him...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

I showed him good and proper.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

I was as good a striker as any man there...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And they liked the fact that I was so young.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Meant I couldn't be taken away to the war.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

But he was right. I did need a box.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Things had changed for Dad and for me.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

He was in the mud with the blood and the shells and the bullets.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

I was in the heat and the noise hammering out metal for pick axes.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

I don't think it's what either of us would have chosen...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

But the war takes your choices away.

***Ernest and Walter sing Henry Burr's "Good Bye, Good Luck, God Bless You."
Original recorded version comes in and plays over the top to mark scene
change.***

Scene 5

Ernest 1

[To audience]

It's 1918.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

I spend my days with melting metal and a heavy hammer.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

I'm stronger than ever...

Rose

I swear, Ernest, that place is turning you in to a piece of steel.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Mum's mouth smiles, but her eyes don't.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Home is a sadder place.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

We're all older and tireder...

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Even Julia.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

The war is a heavy weight to carry.

The family members are preparing the table for tea. Rose reading a letter. She crumples it up and covers her face.

Julia

What's the matter, Mother?

Rose

Nothing. Eat your tea.

Maud

Mother?

Rose

Is Ernest back yet? Where's Ernest.

Maud

He's washing his hands. He'll be through in a minute.

Julia

What did the letter say?

Rose

How can a boy who does everything in a rush be so slow to wash his hands?

William

Let me see the letter, Mother.

Rose holds on to the letter and turns away from William.

Rose

Mrs Wilkins says they might be rationing food soon. Can you believe it? I thought the endless queues were bad enough.

William

Give me the letter.

William gently takes the letter from Rose. She doesn't resist.

Maud

Well?

William

It says he's missing.

Julia

Who?

William

Father of course, who else?

Maud

What does that mean?

William

It means they don't know where he is.

Maud

They're the Army, they should know where everyone is.

Julia

Does it mean he's dead?

William

Not for sure.

Julia

But he might be.

William

Or he might not.

Maud

Or he might be hurt.

William

Or a prisoner.

Julia goes to Rose.

Julia

I know he's not dead. I'm sure he's not dead.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

But we weren't sure...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

That was the trouble...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

And although our everyday lives carried on...

Ernest 1

[To audience]

There was a great hole at the centre of them.

Scene 6

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And then another letter came...

Rose

He's coming back!

Julia

Is he all right?

Rose

He's hurt.

Maud

But he's alive?

Rose

Yes.

William

When?

Rose

Soon. The hospital train will bring him in to Sheffield station.

Julia

And we can get him and bring him home.

Rose

No. He needs more time in hospital to get better. But we can see him at the station.

Ernest 1
[To audience]
We all went.

Ernest 2
[To audience]
I don't know what we expected...

Ernest 3
[To audience]
That he'd come limping down the platform with a smile on his face...

Ernest 1
[To audience]
That he'd give us a cheery grin with a neat bandage wrapped round his forehead.

Ernest 2
[To audience]
It wasn't like that.

Ernest 3
[To audience]
The train spewed out hundreds of stretchers...

Ernest 1
[To audience]
The platform was covered in them...

Ernest 2
[To audience]
Men laid everywhere.

Ernest 3
[To audience]
We looked for Dad.

Ernest 1
[To audience]
Some of the men were sleeping...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Some were silent, staring...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Some said hello...

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Some smiled and joked...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

More than one asked Maud for a kiss...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

But we couldn't see Dad.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

We searched and searched.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

In the end Mum asked a nurse.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

She took us to a stretcher where there was a man completely covered in bandages.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

You couldn't see his face.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

His breathing was slow and heavy...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Like every breath was the hardest work he'd ever done.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Whatever had hit my Dad had hit him hard.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Something meant he had to be covered head to toe in bandages.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Something had crept in to his lungs and meant he couldn't breathe properly.

Reader 1

Gas!

Reader 2 and 3

Gas!

Reader 1, 2 and 3

Gas!

Reader 4

The Guardian newspaper, March 22nd 1918.

Reader 5

"Struggle on Cambrai salient: a hurricane of gas shells."

Reader 3

"A German offensive against our front has opened."

Reader 1

"At about five o'clock this morning the enemy began an intense bombardment of our lines on a very wide front."

Reader 2

“After several hours of this hurricane shelling, in which it is probable a great deal of poison gas was used, the German infantry advanced.”

Reader 4

“The heart of all the people must go out to these battalions upon whom our destiny depends, and who now are making a wall with their bodies against the power of our enemy.”

Ernest 1

[To audience]

I saw an advert in the Yorkshire Evening Post for War Bonds.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

It showed a picture of a man on his own in a trench.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

He was at 'Gas Alert',

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Watching out for an attack.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

The paper said...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

“Some must meet Danger up there at 'Gas Alert', and these must be our bravest.”

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Maybe that was my Dad...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

“Our bravest”

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Out there on his own when a shell hit him.

Music for scene transition.

'Just A Baby's Prayer at Twilight' Henry Burr

Scene 7

Ernest 1

[To audience]

It's 1920.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Dad's home.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

But it's not like it used to be.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

I don't think it ever will be.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

For some people the war might only be a memory.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

It still lives in the Misson family house every day.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Dad don't hardly mention it.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

He says nothing about what he did.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Nothing about how he got hurt.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Sometimes a little about the horses,

Ernest 2

[To audience]

But only ever about the horses...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

How they couldn't move properly in the mud...

Ernest 1

[To audience]

How the shell holes were full of water and if they fell in they couldn't get out and they'd drown.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Always about the horses.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Never about himself.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

I still hammer metal at the Hardy Pick...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

They like me there...

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Feel like I might be there for ever.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

And every day I come home to exactly the same...

Misson family, Readers on stage. Rose is caring for Walter.

Reader 5

From "Medical Diseases of the War" by Arthur Hurst, 1917

Reader 2

"Chlorine, being much heavier than air, readily drifts and sinks into trenches, dug-outs and cellars."

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Dad won't let anyone else look after him but Mum.

Reader 3

"The first effect of inhalation of chlorine is a burning pain in the throat and eyes, accompanied by a sensation of suffocation."

Reader 1

"Pain, which may be severe, is felt in the chest."

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Too proud.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

Doesn't want to upset the rest of us.

Reader 4

"Respiration becomes painful, rapid and difficult."

Reader 5

“Severe headache rapidly follows with a feeling of great weakness in the legs.”

Ernest 1

[To audience]

Only Mum ever sees his wound.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And the doctor, of course.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

He comes once a week.

Reader 3 and 5

“Frequent and painful coughing occurs.”

Reader 1

“A few hours later acute bronchitis or broncho-pneumonia develops.”

Ernest 1

[To audience]

The wound won't heal.

Reader 4

“After recovery from the bronchitis and pneumonia the patient remains weak and exhausted for a considerable time.”

Reader 2

“He gets tired very rapidly and is unable to walk quickly or uphill without getting short of breath.”

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Dad can't do much.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

He finds it hard to breathe.

Reader 4 and 5

"The frightful experience he has passed through often effects his nervous system."

Reader 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

"Headache, vertigo and dyspepsia may continue."

Ernest 1

[To audience]

He hardly ever goes outside.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

No more farming for him.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

No more horses.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

But he still has music.

Ernest 2

[To audience]

Thanks God for his music.

Ernest 3

[To audience]

At least he hasn't lost that too.

Ernest 1

[To audience]

There's still Al Jolson...

Ernest 2

[To audience]

And Dad can still make us laugh singing it.

Walter starts singing 'Swanee', but with 'Sheffield' in place of 'Swanee'. Begins singing it to Rose, making her laugh. The rest of the family join in.

Additional Information

Food rationing was trialled in Sheffield Dec 1917 and introduced to the rest of the country, Mar 1918.

Gases were used as a weapon by both sides during WW1. They are now illegal as a weapon.

Glossary

Respiration is the action of breathing.

Bronchitis is an inflammation of the mucous membrane in the bronchial tubes in the lungs. It typically causes coughing.

Pneumonia is a lung inflammation caused by bacterial or viral infection, in which the air sacs fill with pus and may become solid. Inflammation may affect both lungs.

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