



Birdsong

INTRODUCTION

The play is adapted from the best-selling novel of the same name written by Sebastian Faulks.

The narrative is predominantly about the First World War from the Battle of the Somme through to the end, and the effect it has on the characters involved. It is described in very graphic detail.

The book focusses on the central character, Stephen Wraysford, and his attitude to the war and the conditions his men have to fight in. These are coloured by his experiences before the war when he was working in Amiens, staying with the family of the owner of a textile factory. Stephen and the owner's wife – his second wife and much younger – begin an illicit love affair with devastating consequences. Reference is made to this throughout.

Unlike the book, where there are defined sections covering these events, in the play the pre-war action leading up to and after the love affair are treated as Stephen's memories, whilst in the trenches, and allow for the smooth transition back and forth between the different times/places.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

Stephen Wraysford. Officer in the army, promoted to Lieutenant from the ranks. Brought up in an institution until supported by a benefactor. Not a popular officer as he finds it difficult to offer words of encouragement and inspiration to his men as he does not believe there is a purpose to the war. Had an illicit, but ultimately doomed, love affair with Isabelle before the war which colours his thinking and his attitude. (Playing age 25 – 30)

Azaire. French owner of textile business who is conscious of his social position in the town. Is used to getting his own way and so treats his wife, Isabelle, and his workers very badly. Later partially redeems himself by offering himself as a hostage on behalf of the town to the occupying German forces. (Playing age 50+)

Isabelle. Second wife of Azaire, in a loveless marriage, and step mother to his children. Represses her emotions and actions because of her husband's social standing. Her attraction to Stephen, initially constrained by the formality of the time, eventually leads to their love affair and her leaving the marital home to live with Stephen. Discovering she is expecting his child, she leaves to return to her family, where she believes the child can be best looked after. Despite being badly disfigured through an explosion, she has a brief reconciliation with Stephen without revealing the baby's existence. Subsequently has a relationship with a German soldier. (Playing age 30 +)

Beraud. Pompous, self-opinionated business man with few redeeming features. Takes an unhealthy interest in Isabelle. Has close friendship with Azaire. Regarded as a small-town bully who likes to have his own way. (Playing age 50 – 60).

Jeanne. Isabelle's older sister in whom she confides a lot. She is the stronger and more independent sister who offers care and compassion to Isabelle and takes her in following her split with Stephen. Later acts as a go-between for Isabelle and Stephen. Following Isabelle's death affection grows between Jeanne and Stephen and they eventually marry. (Playing age 35 +)

Lisette. Azaire's daughter who is just reaching the transition from childhood to womanhood. Is attracted to Stephen and tries, unsuccessfully, to get him to reciprocate by threatening to tell her father of Stephen's affair with Isabelle. (Playing age 16 – 18)

Gregoire. Azaire's son. He enjoys the presence of a younger man (Stephen) in the household. (Playing age 12 – 14).

Prostitute (Playing age 20 – 25)

Nurse (Playing age 30 – 40)

Col. Barclay. Senior officer, arrogant, with a somewhat blinkered view of the war, who has no interest in the care and well-being of those subordinate to him. He knows that the German defences have not been destroyed yet orders the men to "go over the top" with predictable consequences. (Playing age 45 – 60).

Captain Gray. Stephen's senior officer who understands the need to support the men under him. He eventually promotes Stephen. He is sympathetic to Stephen's misgivings about the war yet urges him to do what is required to get his men to respect him. (Playing age 45 – 55).

Jack Firebrace. Tunneller, having worked before the war in the construction of the tunnels for the London Underground. Despite being apart he often shows his close affinity with his son and his early death from diphtheria affects him profoundly. Is one of the more senior sappers and is regarded as the joker among his fellow tunnellers. Performs impromptu music-hall songs to the other sappers during their rest times. Through his letters home we get an idea of the feelings of the ordinary soldier at the Front and also of Jack's spirituality. Develops a closer relationship than the others with Stephen, in particular when they are trapped in the tunnels towards the end of the play. Despite near death, he indicates that he would sooner die than end up an invalid in a care home being the subject of everyone's pity (ironically, in the novel, this is exactly what happens to Brennan, a fellow sapper, whose character does not appear in the play). (Playing age 30 – 45)

Turner. Sapper (playing age 30 – 45)

Arthur Shaw. Sapper who is Jack's closest pal in the trenches. (Playing age 25 – 40)

Tipper. Inexperienced young infantryman who says he is 18 but is probably younger. Struggles to come to terms with the demands placed upon him. (Playing age 18)

Evans. Chirpy Welsh sapper. (Playing age 30 – 45)

Levi. German tunneller who Stephen meets at the end of the play – and the war – and they exchange gifts. Small part. (Playing age 30 – 45).

Barman. In French café scenes. (Playing age 30 – 50)

Orderly. In charge of receiving the fallen soldiers. Small part. (Playing age 30 – 40)

Chaplain. Soldier who tends to the soldiers' spiritual needs. Questions his own faith when confronted by the level of carnage. (Playing age 40 – 50)

Ensemble. Various British and German soldiers and French villagers.

Guidance is given in the script on doubling. How much we do will depend on the people available.

Place:

The main action takes place in the trenches at the front near the Somme, in the tunnels and behind the lines. **Time:** 1916 – 1918.

Stephen's memories throughout the play are of Amiens in 1910.