

During the project 'West Bromwich at War 1939-45', the Society held a writing competition for young people in Sandwell, inviting them to respond to the theme.

One of the winning entries was written in the format of a play.

The Resolute Spirit of West Bromwich

By Wesley Rolston

September 1939: Lombard Street, West Bromwich. The stage is set in a traverse (corridor) style. At one end of the corridor is a home (the home end for future reference) with a Mother, Father and Son sitting at a table and chairs listening to music on a wireless; at the other end there is a hospital area (hospital end) representing the District Hospital just off Lombard Street, which is now Edward Street Hospital, where Nurses and Doctors converse with each other and their three patients who lie in beds. Along the corridor children play games and are smiling. Suddenly, there is static as the music on the wireless changes to the voice of Neville Chamberlain reciting his "Declaration of War" speech of 1939. As this speech plays every character remains silent and frozen looking at the wireless. However, once the phrase "this country is at war with Germany" is heard the feeling of peace within the street becomes fractured: the children start to lose energy and become confused by what they hear and some run off out into the audience crying; the patients start to become agitated causing the doctors and nurses to try and retain calm; the Mother moves to her son and holds him tightly. All of the characters freeze upon completion of the speech.

Three Narrators enter from the audience with one moving to each of the three areas of the stage: the hospital end, the home end and the middle of the corridor. These narrators represent outsiders reflecting on what occurs within this street because it is important the audience do not become passive observers to the events of World War Two. Instead, the audience should begin to realise the events are part of their history; the audience should question the events and come to their own conclusions on how society in Lombard Street and the surrounding areas of West Bromwich were changed by World War Two.

Narrator 1: *(standing at the home end)* With those seven words, "This country is at war with Germany", the country changed. Each word weaved its way into every street of every town of every city.

Narrator 2: *(standing at the hospital end)* Those words caused shock at first which stunned society. The people of West Bromwich may have already been preparing for this moment, but did they really believe it would come?

Narrator 3: *(standing in the corridor)* Quickly people prepared and altered their behaviour. Firstly, however, they had to say goodbye to loved ones: which for some was a second goodbye they never thought they would have to do again.

A Teacher now enters from the audience calling out as they come onto the corridor.

Teacher: Quickly children! Line up.

The children line up along the corridor now each holding gas masks. Parents also stand dotted around the audience waving goodbye and trying hard not to show pain at their child's departure.

Teacher: Okay children. The bus is here to take us to the station. Say goodbye. Don't worry your precious heads this will not be for long.

The children wave and their parents reciprocate. The Teacher leads the children off.

Narrator 1: Within West Bromwich children were evacuated to keep them safe. Many were gone for a year, but came back because the bombs that were expected didn't come. This was termed the "Phoney War". However, some children were gone from their families for the full duration of the war.

The Mother hugs her Son; he picks up his rucksack and exits.

Mother: For the second time... for the second time I have to say goodbye to someone I love. Why?

Narrator 2: Loved ones left their homes and those that stayed came together. In West Bromwich the public would volunteer their services in all forms: an example was refuge centres for those left homeless by the early air raids.

Volunteer 1 enters from the home end with an elderly couple and walks along the corridor with them to the hospital end.

Volunteer 1: Do not worry. We will get you both set up in the school hall where you can both relax. And you can stay as long as you need to.

Volunteer 1 and the elderly couple exit.

Narrator 2: Some members of the public took up the role of 'Air Raid Wardens' – or 'the people's friends' as the people of West Bromwich would call them.

Three volunteers now enter with the warden attire: the helmet with a 'W' on the front, gas mask and a blue coat with ARP arm band. All three converse with audience members as if the audience are members of this street for the wardens to look after because during World War Two it was essential wardens knew their borough so that in times of crisis they could respond quickly. Comments the wardens could say to the audience could include:

Volunteer Air Raid Warden 1: Remember, if the siren sounds you get to your Anderson Shelter.

Volunteer Air Raid Warden 2: Or if you do not have your own shelter, get into a communal shelter with your neighbours.

Volunteer Air Raid Warden 3: If you are out shopping or your children are coming home from school, you can also go to a Public shelter.

The Three volunteer Air Raid Wardens then stand within the audience to keep on patrol.

Narrator 3: Society in West Bromwich changed and adapted to the war. Society grouped together to keep everyday life functioning as normal...

Suddenly, an air raid siren goes off. This sound is made by Narrator 1 and 2 who from this moment will make soundscapes of the sounds the people of West Bromwich would have heard during World War Two. This should be applied because the sounds of air raids, bombings and German planes became engrained in the minds of people who lived all over Britain, not just West Bromwich. Therefore, giving the sounds a human quality will demonstrate to the audience the psychological effects the sounds had on everyday people.

Narrator 3: *(gravely)* However, as you can see here, the Blitz came to West Bromwich in November 1940.

The ARP wardens help all the characters, the doctors, nurses and patients, the family, the children, the teacher and the volunteers offstage to the shelters with an atmosphere of urgency filling the stage. Some ARP wardens may call out "Get to your shelters!"

Narrator 3: On the 10th of November 1940 Walsall Road by the Stone Cross received hits...

Distant bomb sounds are made, but loud enough to spark a reaction from the ARP wardens. There are sounds from offstage of children crying and words of reassurance until the siren ceases.

Narrator 3: The rest of the West Midlands were not spared. On the 13th and 14th of November 1940 the Luftwaffe flattened Coventry.

Sounds of very distant bombing in Coventry are created.

Narrator 3: Rescue teams were sent from the War office in West Bromwich to assist.

A group of 5 volunteers (these can be actors who have doubled up roles or they can be extra actors) come onto the stage from the hospital end and run past the narrator with a monumental feeling of distress.

A volunteer: Coventry has been flattened!

Another volunteer: My sister is living there!

Another volunteer: We can only do what we can. But, your sister will be fine.

The rest of the characters now start to re-emerge from where they exited, murmuring as they attempt to take their original places. However, before they can another siren sound is created.

Volunteer Air Raid Warden 1: Everyone back down the shelters now!

Narrator 3: There wasn't much time to relax or to re-build as you can see. The 19th of November 1940 brought the worst raid for West Bromwich. This street, Lombard Street, was the centre point of three hits...

Sounds of German planes start off quietly and get louder and louder until the first bomb is dropped, with the whistling sound and eventual bomb.

Volunteer Air Raid Warden 2: *(running in from the home end of the corridor and calling)* That's flattened the solicitors office up by Bratt Street! I think there are casualties! Quickly!

Volunteers run in from all directions and exit by the home end. Another bomb sound is created.

Volunteer Air Raid Warden 3: *(Calling offstage)* No! Stay in your shelter!

Another bomb sound is created.

Volunteer Air Raid Warden 1: It's hit the laundry building for the hospital! The fire is spreading towards the hospital. We've got to evacuate everyone. We cannot leave them there.

All the Air Raid wardens and volunteers run towards the hospital end and start bringing various patients along the corridor because, in 1940, patients were taken by ambulance or bus to Hallam Hospital further North in West Bromwich: even though the air raid was in full force.

Air Raid Warden 2: *(to patients they are helping)* We will get you to safety. There is a bus waiting to take you.

Doctor: *(quietly to Air Raid Wardens and volunteers)* There aren't enough resources to deal with the injuries sustained tonight.

Nurse: We can go back inside and get anything we can carry.

Doctor: Okay, perfect. We will get what we can and bring them to those with injuries.

The Doctor and Nurse both go back offstage, as though going back into the hospital, to get more resources. All the patients are moved to the other end of the corridor and offstage. The Doctor and Nurse eventually follow with an Air Raid Warden checking there is no one left before they exit.

The siren sound being made by Narrator 1 and 2 now stops.

Narrator 3: This was the worst night for West Bromwich. However, the Luftwaffe came back on the 21st of November 1940 and inflicted more damage around West Bromwich. Over 120 people were killed, 100s were injured, houses were destroyed and parts of the hospital collapsed. So much was lost. However, so much was gained as you have seen. And this is the spirit to come together and look after one another.

A 15 year old girl now enters from the hospital end on a bike and rides along the corridor and freezes when she reaches the home end.

Narrator 3: You might not have seen this girl. But during the air raids this 15 year old girl worked as a dispatch rider for the Warden Service delivering messages around the town. Plus, she helped the wardens extricate people from bombed premises. She was rightly commended with the George Medal. And we thank her once more.

***Narrator 1** now becomes a narrator once more and stands in the hospital area. The Doctor, Nurse and patients all enter in this area and are positioned as they were at the start of the play.*

Narrator 1: Doctors and Nurses looked after the wounded not just in this District Hospital off Lombard Hospital but at Hallam Hospital. The Head matron and Chief Doctor were commended for their bravery.

***Narrator 2** now stands at the home end of the stage and the Mother, Father, Teacher; a couple of Children and Parents enter also.*

Narrator 2: Men and women also respected one another and protected one another within shelters throughout the town.

The volunteers and Air Raid Wardens now enter and stand along the corridor with Narrator 3 standing in the middle of them.

Narrator 3: All the volunteers who joined a service to assist with the war effort gave protection to everyone in West Bromwich. However, World War two continued until 1945 and every single person you see on this stage continued their commitment to protecting West Bromwich until the day peace was declared. Plus, every single person you see symbolise the millions of people across Britain and the world who continued their commitment to protecting one another. We can learn from this companionship.

All: Stay together, stay strong.

All the characters return to their everyday life as the lights dim slowly.