

NEWS

PLAYWRIGHT DELVES INTO FAMILY HISTORY FOR DRAMA

Incredible WWI story of Catholic and Protestant from same street

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The incredible story of two men from the same Belfast street who fought in the First World War is to be told as part of a series of events commemorating the centenary of the Battle of the Somme.

'Medal in the Drawer', a production by Belfast playwright Dr Brenda Winter-Palmer, charts the real-life war journey of two volunteers – one Protestant and one Catholic – from west Belfast, who joined up to fight with the 36th Ulster Division.

For Brenda, this was a labour of love inspired by her personal connection to one of the brave men depicted in the play – her great uncle, Rifleman Willie Kerr.

She explained: "As a child I was always fascinated by a plaque that hung in the hallway of our Andersonstown home. It was inscribed with the name of William Kerr.

"When asked, my mother told me that it was a medal that her uncle had received for fighting in the First World War.

"No one in her family had talked much about him. Indeed in the 1970s in west Belfast not very many people talked freely about family connections with the British Army."

'Medal in the Drawer' shines a light on the fact that, in the midst of the Home Rule crisis, a time of great unrest between nationalists and unionists in Ireland, William Kerr, a west Belfast Catholic, chose to join Carson's predominantly Unionist 36th Ulster Division, rather than one of the Irish regiments.

The young man enlisted almost immediately after the outbreak of war in 1914, along with Tom Martin, a Protestant who lived two doors away at Forthriver Gardens off the Springfield Road.

The pair joined the 14th

(Young Citizen Volunteer) Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles and were shipped off to the Western Front, from where neither would ever return.

Tom perished in a trench collapse in the lead up to the Somme, while William was killed in 1917 at Langemarck during the Third Battle of Ypres.

The play also features two entirely fictional characters, who are based upon the experiences of real people.

When she took on the daunting task of writing 'Medal in the Drawer', Brenda conceded that she knew comparatively little about the First World War. However, she did know about her 'Uncle Willie', and was keen to know more.

"For me the act of writing and directing 'Medal in the Drawer' has been a reclamation of my family history which has never been properly commemorated," she told the News Letter.

A former drama lecturer at Queen's University, Brenda's 35-year career as an actress, writer and director has spanned professional theatre, film and television.

She is now involved with the Living Legacies project, a new research centre based at Queen's which provides a focal point for connecting academic and community researchers interested in how the First World War lives on in the 21st century world.

"I consider myself to be a historical dramatist, and researching and writing this play gave me a huge kick, as it allowed me to delve into my roots like never before," Brenda said.

Now, following successful performances at the Brian Friel and Lyric theatres in Belfast, 'Medal in the Drawer' is to feature as part of 'Belfast Somme 100', a programme of commemorative events marking the centenary of the Battle of the Somme.

For a full list of the dates and venues, and to book tickets, visit www.belfastsomme100.com



'This has been a reclamation of my family history'

Brenda Winter-Palmer

'Belfast Somme 100' events

'Belfast Somme 100' aims to raise awareness of previously overlooked or submerged stories and personal connections that both the Somme and the events of 1916 have had with the broader history and development of Northern Ireland. The project is run by History Hub Ulster with an advisory panel made up of experts in the period and community leaders. It is funded by Belfast City Council. Some of the highlights include: 'No News is Good News', a new play taking the audience back 100 years to meet the villagers who were desperate for news and awaiting telegrams from the front; and Castleton Lanterns, refund images of servicemen to be shown on the big screen at Belfast City Hall.

Karen O'Rawe, chair of History Hub Ulster and Belfast Somme 100, said: "The impact of the Somme on Belfast is remembered in this programme of events. The people of our small city heaved with tears of grief as their young men were killed and maimed, no matter what their background."

For more information about the project, to see a full list of events and to book tickets, visit www.belfastsomme100.com



'Medal in the Drawer' was inspired by Rifleman William Kerr from the Springfield Road in west Belfast



Karen O'Rawe of 'Belfast Somme 100' and Antoinette Morelli, who stars in 'Medal in the Drawer'