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Chariots of Fire: the play

When we heard that someone was making a play out of the Olympics we recognised a classic *TLR* moment and sent John Webb to Hampstead to see what they were about.

I have an admission to make. When I was asked to cover Chariots of Fire, the play, I promised myself that I would diligently watch Chariots of Fire, the film to assess how the former has overcome the switch from one medium to another. But I didn't. I didn't want to spoil the ending. Of course, that admission is me being facetious; and on two counts. First, anyone of a certain age has seen the film at least once if not a number of times. It was a monster hit back in 1981 – the year of Bobby Sands' death, the Brixton riots and the first London Marathon – and everyone either saw it then or has caught it on any given Boxing Day television schedule thereafter. Second, the end of the play could not have been spoilt even if I had watched the film because it is about sport and we all know that nearly all sporting movies and plays finish the same way: triumphantly. Maybe bathetically triumphant. Or in heart-warming triumph. Or even in just sheer-gutsy-through-gritted-teeth triumph. Whatever, it all shakes down the same way. Ask Sly Stallone; he made six versions of this story within the Rocky franchise alone.

And the world loved this story as it was told in Chariots of Fire, the film back in '81. It became a cultural monolith worthy of being called The Film. It scooped four Oscars from seven nominations; scriptwriter Colin Welland became an icon himself when he declared "The British are coming!"; it took nearly \$60 million at the box office in the US alone on only a \$5 million budget; and the soundtrack by Vangelis with that track on it (yes, that track) spent two years in the album charts. You get the picture.

Not surprisingly, the story is unchanged in Chariots of Fire, the play. It follows two exceptional sprinters striving to win gold at the 1924 Paris Olympiad. Eric Liddell, the son of Christian missionaries to China, runs to celebrate the gift he believes he received from God and, more interestingly, to achieve a state of grace during the event itself. Harold Abrahams, the son of an immigrant who made good, craves winning for competition's sake, although we come to understand that for him running is also an appeal to his uncaring father, as well as a "weapon" to use against the anti-Semites.

Yet these two athletes are shown to have much in common. Both are outsiders in a world dominated by clubbable types of a certain class and demeanour. Liddell's Christian ethics lead him to straight talk and so ruffle the plumped feathers of the likes of the then Prince of Wales, who want him to run on the Sabbath. Abrahams' clear-eyed ambition, use of a professional coach and his being a Jew directly attack the last gasps of Edwardian Englishness and amateurism.

Playwright Mike Bartlett's adaptation of the screenplay is pretty faithful, retaining and emphasising what makes this sporting story interesting. Usually Bartlett has great nerve and ambition when it comes to choosing what he puts on stage, as seen in his Earthquakes In London and 13, both of which had big themes and big cast lists; his nerve certainly holds here. He throws the opening ceremony of the 1924 Olympics onto Hampstead Theatre's small circular stage, as well as a performance of the D'Oyly Carte opera company and a busy, bustling Highland athletics meeting complete with crowds, races, and jigs. All are charmingly staged.

The sense of bustle runs throughout the first half, aided by Bartlett splicing some scenes. This inter-cutting also enables him to heighten the contrasts between youth and old age, restraint and ambition, faith and ego. Letters are spoken and juxtaposed to create tensions between characters and scenes

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overlap to show how sport permeates these peoples' lives.

In the second half these conflicts dissipate despite our arrival at the Paris Games, partly owing to the non-occurrence of the showdown we were expecting throughout the first half as Liddell doesn't run against Abrahams, much to the latter's disappointment. He wants "to be the best in the world, not the best of who turned up". The loss of tension is also in part a result of longer scenes that expose some of the flatness of Welland's original characterisations. There are some crisp one-liners added by Barlett but we could have done with more of the fresh dialogue and subtle intimacies shared between characters seen in Bartlett's own plays.

In contrast to my memory of the film – stylistically elegant and a little worthy – director Ed Hall's production aims to be whole-heartedly energetic, fun and earthy. It is all red-white-and-blue bunting, brassy bands, and toffs in boaters. Many of the numerous characters are played with lip-smacking relish by a talented ensemble and they jump at their roles, accents and instruments. The singing is top-notch.

There are megawatt levels of energy too when the running itself is dramatised. Boy, these actors are fit. They really run. They run around the revolving stage, they run across it and they run up behind the audience on Miriam Buether's wooden stadium set. Their real exertions are exciting. As is Tam Williams' high-risk hurdling as Lord Lindsey, in one of the show's stand-out scenes, which he does not just once but again and again. Amidst all this activity there are some great stylised moments such as the recreation, with a row of actors which references Eadweard Muybridge, of film footage showing Abraham's stride pattern, shown to him by his coach.

At the production's centre are two strong performances. James McArdle is an intense Abrahams pushing others around him and himself to succeed, aware of his shortcomings and possessing charm. In playing Eric Liddell Jack Lowden has a hard job of making a good man interesting and his performance has calmness, charisma, is warm and open. His scenes with Natasha Broomfield as his sister Jennie are delicately played and full of heart.

Will Chariots of Fire the play achieve the status of The Film? The producers believe so, as they have booked it into the West End already. And it may well be that they are right, as, even though at this story's centre there is bigotry, religious intolerance and vaulting ambition, nothing very dark happens. Which might explain why in 1981, when Britain was in upheaval, in recession and had a deeply unpopular government, The Film was so successful and why, now, the play might just run and run. It is, after all, a show with great energy and great panache that ultimately celebrates not only great sporting achievements but also great sportsmanship. And hurrah for that!

**Chariots of Fire transfers from Hampstead to the West End this month.
See www.chariotsoffireonstage.com for details.**

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