

The Best Christmas Present Ever

Michael Morpurgo

(The idea is less to present a scripted play and more to allow the characters to tell their story, concentrating on their individual words and voices. Storytelling is very powerful and the aim is to draw the audience in to the story by surrounding them with personal memories as the characters speak directly to them – a bit Jackanory-ish, really.)

In this way, the characters with main storytelling roles (Sam and narrator Jim) will read from what looks like a storybook.

Characters:

Silhouetted soldier:

Boys: Thomas Samworth and William Overall (+ Mark Samworth)

Sam: Andrew Whitney

(not named in the book but we'll go for an abbreviation of 'good samaritan')

Connie: Mary Smith

Jim (narrator): Tim McEwen

Boy with a dog: Ben Samworth?

Old Man Neighbour (played by one of the British soldiers): Charlie Overall

Jim (soldier): Michael Simpson

Hans: Peter Greenwood

German soldiers (non-speaking) x6-ish:

Private Schmidt: Maddy Irving

British soldiers (non-speaking) x6-ish:

Private Morris: Charlie Overall

Matron: member of the choir

Choir: *(seated throughout (except final carol) to avoid breaks in the flow with getting up & down)*

Scenes:

(see diagram, attached)

Lighting – help needed, please.

Prelude:

(message to cast: if this works it could be a very powerful opening; please don't tell anyone about it, so that we can get the maximum effect on the night – thank you!!)

Choir: medley of French & WW1 songs

All lights slowly dim & then go off.

Jim Woolley; Reveille on trumpet

Silence – one minute?

An opaque screen mid-way down the chancel is lit softly from behind by the outdoor floodlights through the altar windows.

Behind the screen stands a soldier and two boys standing on either side of him, the soldier rests a hand on each boy's shoulder – as the lights dim, they emerge as silhouettes.

Floodlights turned off.

Muffled bell tolls – x5

*Out of the silence, **the boys sing 'Goodbye ...'***

After the second verse they are accompanied very quietly by the choir & soldiers (children)

Fades to silence.

Floodlights and inside lights fade back up.

As the lights come back on the soldiers walk silently to their positions in the trenches; they sit huddled on the ground, backs against the pew ends, heads down.

Jim (n) is in the pulpit & Connie in an armchair by the pulpit (and raised on staging)

Choir move to the centre aisle of the chancel once the opening is complete

Scene 1: The roll-top desk

Sam stands by an old roll-top desk; he runs his hands over its surface in deep thought and then turns to the audience, takes a deep breath and then speaks:

Sam: I spotted it in a junk shop in Bridport, a roll-top desk. The man said it was early nineteenth century, and oak. I had been looking for a desk like this for years, but never found one I could afford. This one was in bad condition, the roll top in several pieces, one leg clumsily mended, scorch marks all down one side.

It was going for very little money, and I reckoned I was just about capable enough to have a go at restoring it. It would be a risk, a challenge, but here was my chance to have a roll-top desk at last. I paid the man and brought it back to my workroom at the back of the garage. I began work on it on Christmas Eve, mostly because the house was resonating with overexcited relatives and I wanted some peace and quiet.

Choir: medley of short excerpts from Carols & Cmas songs (quietly as if in background)

(Sam begins to open the desk top & drawers, generally showing it off)

I removed the roll top completely and pulled out the drawers. Each one of them confirmed that this would be a bigger job than I had first thought. The veneer had lifted almost everywhere – it looked like flood damage. Both fire and water had clearly taken their toll on this desk. The last drawer was stuck fast. I tried all I could to ease it out gently. In the end I used brute force. I struck it sharply with the side of my fist and the drawer flew open to reveal a shallow space underneath, a secret drawer.

(Sam mimes hitting the side of the desk, delves into the depths and pulls out a tin)

There was something in there. I reached in and took out a small black tin box. Taped to the top of it was a piece of lined note paper, and written on it in shaky handwriting:

Connie: 'Jim's last letter, received 25th January 1915. To be buried with me when the time comes.'

Sam: I knew as I did it that it was wrong of me to open the box, but curiosity got the better of my scruples. It usually does.
Inside the box there was an envelope. The address read:

Jim (n): 'Mrs Jim Macpherson, 12 Copper Beeches, Bridport, Dorset'.

Sam: I took out the letter and unfolded it. It was written in pencil and dated at the top 26th December 1914.

Scene 2: A happier frame of mind

Choir: *Choir hums (or sings very quietly?) 'It's a Long way to Tipperary' over the opening of Jim's letter:*

Jim (n): Dearest Connie,

I write to you in a much happier frame of mind because something wonderful has just happened that I must tell you about at once. We were all standing to in our trenches yesterday morning, Christmas morning. It was crisp and quiet all about, as beautiful a morning as I've ever seen, as cold and frosty as a Christmas morning should be.

I should like to be able to tell you that we began it. But the truth, I'm ashamed to say, is that Fritz began it. First someone saw a white flag waving from the trenches opposite. Then they were calling out to us from across no-man's-land:

Private Schmidt shouts & waves (stays seated)

P Schmidt: Happy Christmas, Tommy!
Happy Christmas!

Jim (n): When we had got over the surprise some of us shouted back:

Private Morris shouts and waves back (stays seated)

P Morris: Same to you, Fritz! Same to you!

Jim (n): I thought that would be that. We all did. But then suddenly one of them was up there in his grey greatcoat and waving a white flag.

A second German soldier stands up, waving a white flag

P Morris: Don't shoot, lads!

Jim (n): And no one did.
Then there was another Fritz up on the parapet, and another.

German soldiers all begin to stand up, they stand very still

Jim (n): I called out:

Jim (s): Keep your heads down, it's a trick!

Jim (n): But it wasn't.

One of the German soldiers begins waving a bottle above his head.

P Schmidt: It is Christmas Day, Tommy. We have schnapps. We have sausage. We meet you? Yes?

German soldiers begin milling together

Jim (n): By this time there were dozens of them walking towards us across no-man's-land and not a rifle between them.

Little Private Morris was the first up.

P Morris: Come on, boys. What are we waiting for?'

British soldiers begin to get up tentatively, but gaining confidence they move forward, hands outstretched and the soldiers on the two sides move around shaking hands with each other.

Jim (n): And then there was no stopping them. I was the officer. I should have called a halt to it there and then, I suppose, but the truth is that it never even occurred to me. All along their line and ours I could see men walking slowly towards one another, grey coats, khaki coats meeting in the middle. And I was one of them. I was part of this. In the middle of the war we were making peace.

You cannot imagine, dearest Connie, my feelings as I looked into the eyes of the Fritz officer who approached me, hand outstretched.

Hans moves towards Jim (they meet in front of the bench), they shake hands warmly. As they meet, the other soldiers stop and look towards them (freeze- framed whilst shaking hands)

Hans: Hans Wolf. I am from Dusseldorf. I play the cello in the orchestra.
Happy Christmas!

Jim (s): Captain Jim Macpherson - and a Happy Christmas to you, too!
I'm a school teacher from Dorset, in the west of England.

Hans (smiling): Ah. Dorset, I know this place. I know it very well.

*Hans & Jim sit on the bench and talk.
The other soldiers also begin to mill around again – some of them go and fetch Christmas cake and they begin to hand it around amongst themselves and the audience.*

Jim (n): We shared my rum ration and his excellent sausage. And we talked, Connie, how we talked. He spoke almost perfect English. But it turned out that he had never set foot in Dorset. He had learned all he knew of England from school, and from reading books in English. His favourite writer was Thomas Hardy, his favourite book *Far from the Madding Crowd*. So out there in no-man's-land we talked of Bathsheba and Gabriel Oak and Sergeant Troy and Dorset.

He had a wife and one son, born just six months ago. As I looked about me there were huddles of khaki and grey everywhere, all over no-man's-land, smoking, laughing, talking, drinking, eating. Hans Wolf and I shared what was left of your wonderful Christmas cake, Connie. He thought the marzipan was the best he had ever tasted. I agreed. We agreed about everything Connie, and he was my enemy. There never was a Christmas party like it, Connie.

All the soldiers settle in mixed huddles.

Choir: Friendship Song – WW1 period (tbc)

Scene 3: looking for Connie

Sam: I folded the letter again and slipped it carefully back into its envelope. I told no one about my find, but kept my shameful intrusion to myself. It was this guilt I think, that kept me awake all night. By morning, I knew what I had to do. I made an excuse and did not go to Church with the others. Instead I drove into Bridport, just a few miles away. I asked a boy walking his dog where Copper Beeches was.

During the above speech, one of the soldiers removes his cap & walks from the front (where there is a dog on a lead waiting for him), walks up the aisle towards Sam, points directions and moves on towards pulpit & back to the front. He leaves his dog there & rejoins the soldiers.

Sam moves into the middle of the huddles of soldiers

Number twelve turned out to be nothing but a burnt-out shell, the roof gaping, the windows boarded up. I knocked at the house next door and asked if anyone knew the whereabouts of a Mrs Macpherson.

One of the soldiers stands up, removes his helmet & puts on a flat cap and some slippers

Old Man: Oh, yes, I knew her well.
A lovely old lady, a bit muddled-headed, but at her age she is entitled to be, isn't she? 101 years old.

Old man turns himself back into a soldier, sits back down and Sam turns away.

Sam: She had been in the house when it caught fire. No one really knew how the fire started, but it could well have been candles. She used candles rather than electricity, because she always thought electricity was too expensive. The fireman had got her out just in time. She was in a nursing home now, he told me, Burlington House, on the Dorchester road, on the other side of town.

*Sam turns and looks & gestures towards Connie and Jim.
He then withdraws to his desk to watch the action from there.*

Scene 4: a football match

Jim (n): Then someone, I don't know who, brought out a football.

Soldiers all begin moving around again, Sam throws a football to Private Schmidt, goals are set up and they begin to play.

Greatcoats were dumped in piles to make goal posts, and the next thing we knew, it was Tommy against Fritz out in the middle of no-man's-land.

Hans and Jim stand and watch the game, pointing and supporting generally.

Hans Wolf and I looked on and cheered, clapping our hands and stamping our feet, to keep out the cold as much as anything.

The football game continues around them for a minute or two (encourage one or two participants from the audience?)

P Schmidt: Goal!!

More football ...

P Morris: & one for us!!

*Hans and Jim pause, face each other, put a hand on each other's shoulder
The game pauses around them*

There was a moment when I noticed our breaths mingling in the air between us.
He saw it too and smiled.

They let their arms drop

Hans: Jim Mcpherson, I think this is how we should resolve this war. A football match. No one dies in a football match. No children are orphaned. No wives become widows.

Jim (s): I'd prefer cricket, then we Tommies could be sure of winning, probably.

Jim (n): We laughed at that, and together we watched the game.

A few seconds more football

P Schmidt: Goal!!

Soldiers all pause/freeze framed in their reactions

Jim (n): Sad to say, Connie, Fritz won, two goals to one. But as Hans generously said:

Hans: Our goal was wider than yours, so it wasn't quite fair.

The soldiers begin to mill around again, friendly & chatting.

Hans and Jim move further down the aisle amongst the soldiers.

Jim (n): The time came, and all too soon, when the game was finished, the schnapps and the cake and the rum and the sausage had long since run out, and we knew it was all over. I wished Hans well:

Jim (s): My friend, I hope you will see your family again soon, that all this fighting will end soon and we can all go home.

Hans: I think that is what every soldier wants, on both sides. Take care, Jim Mcpherson. I shall never forget this moment, nor you.

The soldiers all begin to take leave of each other (waving & milling around) and slowly move back to their original positions.

Hans and Jim are left as the only soldiers standing in the aisle; as the narrator speaks, Hans salutes Jim and walks slowly back towards the vestry; Jim walks towards the pulpit, they turn & wave to each other.

Jim (n): He saluted and walked away from me slowly – unwillingly, I felt. He turned to wave just once and then became one of the hundreds of grey-coated men drifting back towards their trenches.

Jim (s) watches Hans disappear and then turns to Jim (n), salutes to him and Connie (they wave back) and he then slowly returns to sit on the bench (walking round the Church via the pulpit) to watch the last part of the story. Hans joins him back on the bench.

Lights fade to darkness

Jim (n): That night, back in our dugouts we heard them singing a carol, and singing it quite beautifully. It was 'Stille Nacht' – 'Silent Night'.

Choir: Stille Nacht - first verse in German & then repeated in English

Jim (n): Our boys gave them a rousing chorus of 'While shepherds watched.'

Choir: While Shepherds Watched (first verse)

Lights fade back on

Jim (n): We exchanged carols for a while and then we all fell silent. We had had our time of peace and goodwill, a time I will treasure as long as I live.

Jim (s) *with pen and paper in his hand, but looking towards Connie & Jim (n):*
Dearest Connie, by Christmas time next year, this war will be nothing but a distant and terrible memory. I know from all that happened today how much both armies long for peace. We shall be together again soon, I'm sure of it.
Your loving Jim.

Muffled bell toll – x5

Scene 5: The best Christmas present ever

Sam walks to the middle of the aisle, raises his hand briefly to Jim (s) who raises his hand in return

Sam: I found Burlington House Nursing Home easily enough. There were paper chains up in the hallway and a lighted Christmas tree stood in the corner with a lop-sided angel on top. I said I was a friend come to visit Mrs Mcpherson to bring her a Christmas

present. I could see through into the dining room where everyone was wearing a paper hat and singing along to 'Good King Wenceslas'.

Choir: first line of 'Good King Wenceslas'
stop when interrupted:

Matron appears from the midst of the choir

Matron (looking to the choir): I think that's enough for now, my dears!

She takes Sam's arm

Sam: The matron had a hat on too and seemed happy enough to see me. She even offered me a mince pie. She walked me along the corridor.

Matron: Mrs Mcpherson is not in with the others. She's rather confused today so we thought it best if she had a good rest. She's no family you know – no one visits. So I'm sure she'll be only too pleased to see you.

Matron takes Sam to Connie, then withdraws.

Sam: The old lady was sitting in a wheelchair, her hands folded in her lap. She had silver white hair pinned into a wispy bun. She was gazing out at the garden.

Hello.

Connie turns and looks up at Sam calmly but vacantly, as if she has been brought back from a dream.

Sam: Happy Christmas, Connie.
I found this. I think it's yours.

Connie sits up straight and looks Sam in the face very carefully.

Sam opens up the tin box and gives it to her.

Connie edges forward as if she has recognised Sam, takes the box from him and looks excited and happy

Sam: I explained about the desk, about how I had found it, but I don't think she was listening. For a while she said nothing, but stroked the letter tenderly with her fingertips.

Suddenly she reached out and took my hand. Her eyes were filled with tears.

Connie: You told me you'd come home by Christmas, dearest, and here you are, the best Christmas present in the world. Come closer, Jim dear, sit down.

Sam sits down beside her and she kisses him on the cheek

Connie: I read your letter so often, Jim, every day. I wanted to hear your voice in my head. It always made me feel you were with me. And now you are. Now you're back you can read it to me yourself. Would you do that for me? I just want to hear your voice again, Jim. I'd love that so much. And then perhaps we'll have some tea. I've made you a nice Christmas cake, marzipan all around. I know how much you love marzipan.

Choir: Sprig of Thyme (Coope Boyes) - tbc

Scene 6: ... and finally.

Hans: The voice you have heard this evening comes from a letter written just after the Christmas truce in the trenches of the First World War – exactly one hundred years ago (bar a couple of weeks, which is nothing really between friends, after all).

It is full of hope but it was the last letter that Connie ever received, these were Jim's last words; his life lasted just a few more days.

Jim (s): Tonight is about remembering, it is about gratitude and it is about a wish for peace for all.

Thank you for sharing it with us.

We have one last request – please join us in a Christmas carol and then please join us for some refreshments and then we may well move to the Plough afterwards, if you would like to come too!

Carol: O Little Town of Bethlehem

Children sing: We wish you a Merry Christmas!