

The story of 'Mulan' was made internationally known thanks to Disney's 1998 cartoon film:

In ancient China, a girl called Mulan wanted to bring honour to her family and, when her elderly father was conscripted to go to war by order of the Chinese empire, she disguised herself as a man to enlist into the army in her father's place.

Disney launched a live-action film version in March 2020.

Mulan is portrayed as a filial daughter who loves her father and has become a symbol of bravery. She is a famous Chinese historical female figure.



But to be very honest, we do not know if there really is a 'Mulan', there is no record of such a person in Chinese history.

The original story is from an ancient Chinese poem, 'The Ode to Mulan' (木兰词 – mùlán cí), dating back to the 6th century. The story was revived and made popular in the Tang Dynasty between 11th and 12th century. The legend of Mulan has continued to be popular till today and has been made into many different films, tv-series and cartoons.



Nowadays many Chinese students learn about the poem and story at school.

木兰辞 – mùlán cí

Chinese with HanYuPinYin

:The Poem:

The Ode to Mulan

English Interpretation

唧唧复唧唧，木兰当户织。
jī jī fù jī jī , mù lán dāng hù zhī ,

不闻机杼声，惟闻女叹息。
bù wén jī zhù shēng , wéi wén nǚ tàn xī 。

问女何所思，问女何所忆？
wèn nǚ hé suǒ sī , wèn nǚ hé suǒ yì ?

女亦无所思，女亦无所忆。
nǚ yì wú suǒ sī , nǚ yì wú suǒ yì 。

昨夜见军帖，可汗大点兵，
zuó yè jiàn jūn tiē , kè hàn dà diǎn bīng ,

军书十二卷，卷卷有爷名。
jūn shū shí èr juàn , juàn juàn yǒu yé míng 。

阿爷无大儿，木兰无长兄，
ā yé wú dà ér , mù lán wú zhǎng xiōng ,

愿为市鞍马，从此替爷征。
yuàn wéi shì ān mǎ , cóng cǐ tì yé zhēng 。

东市买骏马，西市买鞍鞯，
dōng shì mǎi jùn mǎ , xī shì mǎi ān jiān ,

南市买辔头，北市买长鞭。
nán shì mǎi pèi tóu , běi shì mǎi cháng biān 。

旦辞爷娘去，暮宿黄河边，
dàn cí yé niáng qù , mù sù huáng hé biān 。

不闻爷娘唤女声，
bù wén yé niáng huàn nǚ shēng ,

但闻黄河流水声溅溅。
dàn wén huáng hé liú shuǐ shēng jiān jiān 。

“Click click” and again “click click”,
Mulan weaves facing the doorway.

No sound of the loom and shuttle,
Only that of the girl sighing.

Ask her of whom she thinks of,
Ask her for whom she longs for?

The girl thinks of no one,
The girl longs for no one.

Seeing the conscription notice last night,
The Khan is calling many troops.

The army’s lists are in twelve scrolls,
Roll upon roll is Father’s name.

Father has no elder son,
Mulan has no big brother.

Willing to buy saddle and horse at the market,
And go to war in Father’s place.

In the east market a fine horse is bought,
In the west market a saddle is bought,

In the south market a bridle is bought,
In the north market a long whip is bought.

Leaving her parents in the morning,
Sleeping by the Yellow River in the evening.

Can’t hear the sound of her parents calling,

Only the sound of the Yellow River’s current going
“swish swish”.

旦辞黄河去，暮宿黑山头，
dàn cí huáng hé qù , mù sù hēi shān tóu ,

不闻爷娘唤女声，
bù wén yé niáng huàn nǚ shēng ,

但闻燕山胡骑声啾啾。
dàn wén yàn shān hú qí shēng jiù jiù 。

万里赴戎机，关山渡若飞，
wàn lǐ fù róng jī , guān shān dù ruò fēi 。

朔气传金柝，寒光照铁衣。
shuò qì chuán jīn chāi , hán guāng zhào tiě yī 。

将军百战死，壮士十年归。
jiāng jūn bǎi zhàn sǐ , zhuàng shì shí nián guī 。

归来见天子，天子坐明堂，
guī lái jiàn tiān zǐ , tiān zǐ zuò míng táng 。

策勋十二转，赏赐百千强。
cè xūn shí èr zhuǎn , shǎng cì bǎi qiān qiáng 。

可汗问所欲，
kè hán wèn suǒ yù ,

木兰不用尚书郎，
mù lán bú yòng shàng shū láng ,

愿借明驼千里足，
yuàn jiè míng tuó qiān lǐ zú ,

送儿还故乡。
sòng ér huán gù xiāng 。

爷娘闻女来，出郭相扶将。
yé niáng wén nǚ lái , chū guō xiāng fú jiāng 。

阿姊闻妹来，当户理红妆。
ā zǐ wén mèi lái , dāng hù lǐ hóng zhuāng 。

Leaving the Yellow River in the morning,
Camping in the Black Mountain in the evening.

Can't hear the sound of her parents calling,

Only the call of the Yan Mountain horsemen -
"geo geo".

Ten thousand miles she rode in war,
Crossing passes and mountains as if on a wing.

On the northern air comes the sentry's gong,
Cold light shines on armours of steel.

Generals die after a hundred battles,
War heroes return after ten years' time.

They return to see the emperor,
The Emperor sits in the Bright hall.

The merit scrolls list twelve promotions,
And awards to one hundred thousand strong
soldiers.

The Khan asks what one wishes for,

Mulan has no use for an imperial minister post,

But wish to borrow a swift mount with good
endurance,

To send this child back home.

Parents hear that daughter is coming,
They go out the city walls, supporting each other.

Elder sister hears that little sister is coming,
She waits at the doorway with her makeup on.

小 弟 闻 姊 来，
xiǎo dì wén zǐ lái ,

Little brother hears that elder sister is coming,

磨 刀 霍 霍 向 猪 羊。
mó dāo huò huò xiàng zhū yáng 。

The knife is “honed” and “honed” for a feast of pig and goat.

开 我 东 阁 门， 坐 我 西 阁 床。
kāi wǒ dōng gé mén , zuò wǒ xī gé chuáng 。

I open the door eastside of my bedroom,
I sit on the bed westside of my bedroom.

脱 我 战 时 袍， 著 我 旧 时 裳。
tuō wǒ zhàn shí páo , zhe wǒ jiù shí cháng 。

I take off my wartime robes,
I put on my old times dress.

当 窗 理 云 鬓， 对 镜 贴 花 黄。
dāng chuāng lǐ yún bìn , duì jìng tiē huā huáng 。

At the window she arranges her cloud-like hair,
At the mirror a golden flower adorns her forehead.

出 门 看 伙 伴， 伙 伴 皆 惊 惶，
chū mén kàn huǒ bàn , huǒ bàn jiē jīng huáng 。

Going out to see her comrades,
Comrades are all startled,

同 行 十 二 年，
tóng háng shí èr nián ,

Marching together for twelve years,

不 知 木 兰 是 女 郎。
bù zhī mù lán shì nǚ láng 。

No one knew Mulan was a girl.

雄 兔 脚 扑 朔， 雌 兔 眼 迷 离，
xióng tù jiǎo pū shuò , cí tù yǎn mí lí 。

The buck bounces here and there,
Whilst the doe has misty eyes,

两 兔 傍 地 走，
liǎng tù bàng dì zǒu ,

But when the two rabbits run side by side,

安 能 辨 我 是 雄 雌？
ān néng biàn wǒ shì xióng cí ？

How can you tell if I am male or female?

End of Poem

Interesting things to discuss about in **The Ode to Mulan**

Discuss: What is ‘The Ode to Mulan’?

The poem of Mulan is like a ‘ballad’ - a poem that tells a story.

The poem was first found in an ancient Chinese book called ‘The Musical Records of Old and New’.

In the poem’s title ‘木兰辞 – mùlán cí’, the Chinese word ‘辞 – cí’ literally translates as ‘to take leave’, so it can be read as ‘**Mulan takes leave**’ or ‘**Mulan resigns**’. The word has the same sound as ‘词 – cí’ meaning ‘lyrics’, which is sometimes used instead: ‘木兰词 – mùlán cí’, making it ‘**The Lyric of Mulan**’. Could the poem actually be the lyrics to a song?

The poem is mostly made up of five-character phrases, with a few lines extending to seven or nine. **Activity:** If Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter verse sounds like ‘Di-dum Di-dum Di-dum Di-dum Di-dum’, what do you think Mulan’s five-character phrase rhythm would be like?

It is interesting that some sounds are written into the poem rather than described. **Activity:** Can you imagine what these sounds are like?

The clicking of the loom and shuttle as Mulan weaves at the beginning of the poem.



The swishing of the water when Mulan camps overnight at the Yellow River after leaving home.



The sound made by the Yan Horseman (What do you think “jiu jiu”/“geo geo” sound like? Is it the neighs of horses or is it the whistling from one horseman to another?)



The honing and sharpening of the knife by Mulan’s little brother for preparing the food to celebrate Mulan’s return.

Activity: Some academics suspect the poem is from a folk song. If ‘The Ode to Mulan’ was a song, what kind of song do you think it would sound like? Would it be a folksong, or would it be equivalent to the pop-songs or rap-songs we know now, which are very rhythmic?

Discuss: The poem doesn't always rhyme?

The poem contains 31 couplets. When spoken in Chinese mandarin, some of the couplets doesn't rhyme, but they can rhyme in certain Chinese regional dialects. Like the English language and regional accents, the Chinese language and regional dialects had evolved throughout history and some sounds have changed – very much like the language in Shakespeare's plays (in 16 Century), which is very different to the English we use nowadays.

Who wrote 'The Ode to Mulan'?

We do not know. The author of the poem is anonymous. The book it was found in – 'The Musical Records of Old and New' - has over 5000 pieces dating from the Han Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty, collected by the Ministry of Music (乐府 – yuè fǔ). The book itself is arranged by 郭茂倩 Guōmàoqiàn during the mid-Song dynasty in the 11th Century. Like the Brothers Grim who collected fairy tales, the Ministry of Music has collected a library of musical pieces from all around China.

Discuss: When is the story of Mulan set in?

Experts dated the composition of the poem to be in the 6th Century, so we think Mulan is set in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, which lasted from year 386 to 589. **Activity:** Have a look at the next page and compare the Chinese history timeline to the English history timeline!

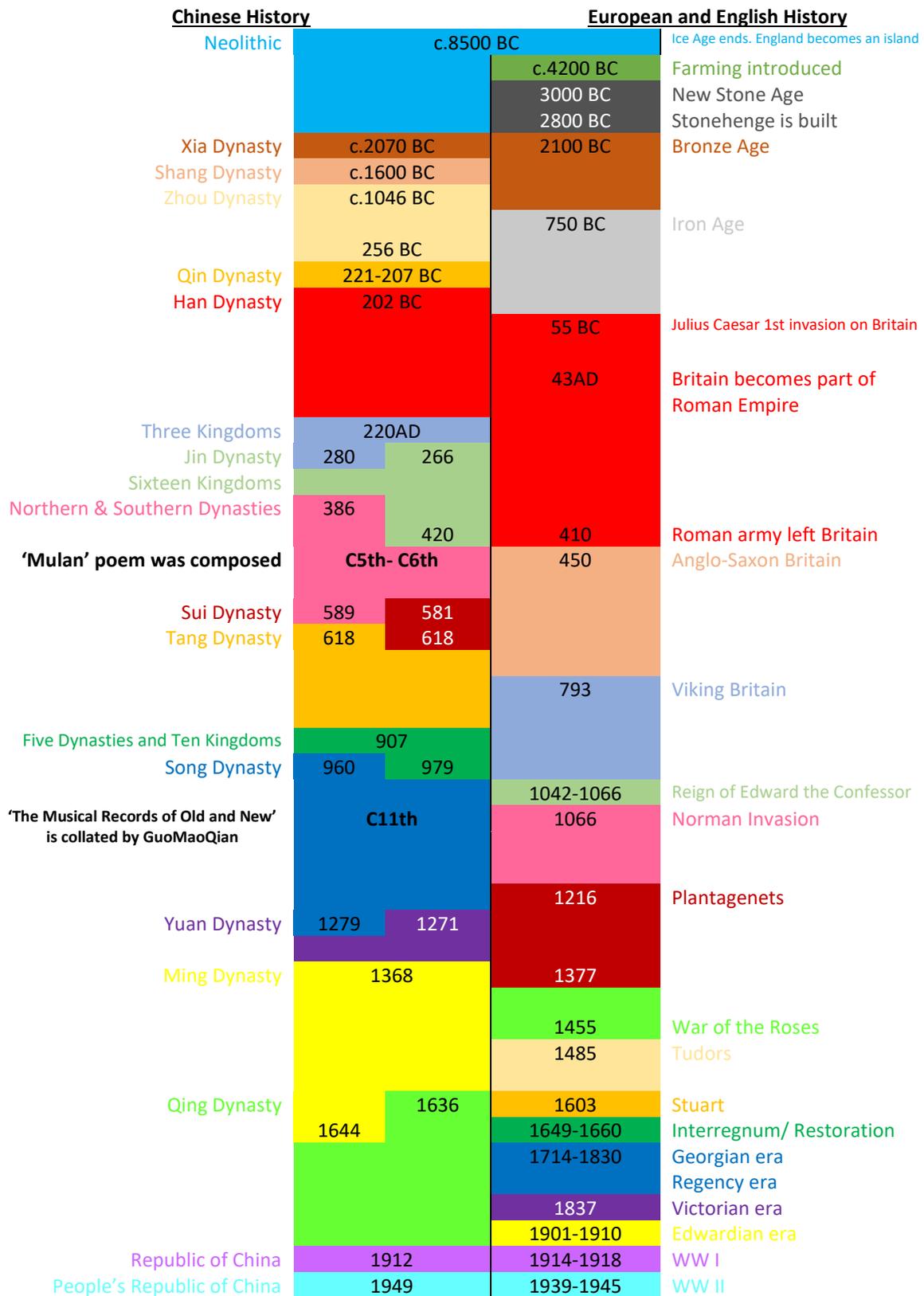
At that time, China was divided between the north and the south. The rulers of the Northern Wei dynasties were from non-Han-Chinese ethnic groups, most of them from Turkic peoples. This could be where Mulan originated from because the poem refers to the Emperor/Son of Heaven as 'Khan', which is the title given to rulers amongst the nomadic people of the north.

Interestingly, many adaptations of the story have Mulan and the army fighting against these nomadic invaders, like the Huns and the Rouran. For example, in Disney's version Mulan defends the Empire from the 'barbaric Huns (匈奴 – Xiongnu).



We never find out who is the enemy in the poem, but one thing we are certain: from the period of Sixteen Kingdoms to the Northern and Southern Dynasties, China was very divided - imagine the World Wars, with everyone fighting each

other. It was a time of chaos and unrest, and it is during such a turbulent time when ‘heroes’ and ‘legends’ are born. And that is what Mulan is – a Legend.



Discuss: What does Mulan’s name mean?

The term ‘木兰 – mùlán’ is from ‘木兰花 - mùlán huā’, which is ‘magnolia’ – the flower. We never find out if Mulan has a last name, the poem does not tell us. Recent versions of the story, including Disney, uses the family name ‘花 – Huā’ which means ‘flower’. So when you pronounce Mulan’s full name in Chinese, with the last name in the front, ‘花木兰- huā mùlán’ is a clever and poetic play on the flower magnolia.

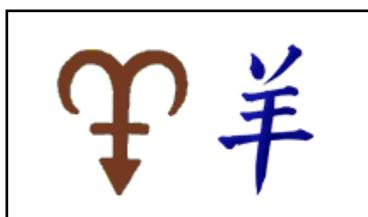
Discuss: How did Mulan manage to pretend to be a man in the army for ten years?

We don’t know!! The poem strangely misses out the part where Mulan is in the army and fighting in the war (all that is mentioned is that she fought for ten years and has been to many places). The good thing is this has allowed adaptations, like the Disney cartoon and other productions, to add more dramatic or comedic events to the story. **Activity:** What do you think happened?

Discuss: Why did Mulan have to pretend to be a man to join the army?

This is because during ancient China there are certain expectations and stricter conduct for men and women. For a woman to be a soldier and live with a group of men who are not related to her family is ‘taboo’. This may seem strange now, but there were different expectations in the past. For example, the idea of marriage is very different during the Regency era compare to modern times. **Activity:** Do you think there is a difference between being a boy and a girl now?

Chinese characters might be able to reveal a little about the traditional attitudes towards boys and girls. Chinese characters derived from pictures and pictograph. **Activity:** Look at the examples below, can you guess what words they are? The pictograph is on the left and Chinese character is on the right.



Activity: Here are the Chinese characters for **Man** and **Woman**. What do you think their pictograph looked like?

男 女

Man

Woman

(Nán)

(Nǚ)

The Chinese character of **Woman** is thought to look like a 'kneeling figure'. In ancient China, the idea of being a good girl is to be subservient and respectful. Her activities are mainly indoors.

The Chinese character of **Man** is actually made up of two other characters:

田 + 力

Field (Tián) Force (Lì)

In ancient China, the idea of being a boy is to be strong and hardworking, and boys would be expected to work in the fields. His activities are mainly outdoors.

Discuss: So Mulan went against the traditional expectation of being a girl in those times and she is hailed as a heroine for it?

Yes, it sounds very hypocritical. The easiest way to explain this is that rules and traditions are first created to make the world a safe and easy place to live. As time passes and new ideas are formed, they needed to be changed as well. It was only in 1918 when women were allowed to vote in the UK. Mulan is very brave and she proves her ability by surviving the war. But it is also important to note she didn't set out to change the rules, she originally joined the army to save her father and after the war she returned home without telling anyone her real identity. This is not saying that girls are better than boys or vice versa, but that we should keep an open mind to what we are all capable of.

Activity: Can you think of any similar characters in English or European history, stories and folklore?

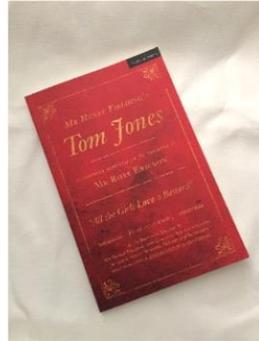
The Ballad of Mulan - Creatives



Director, Playwright & Show Operator: **Ross Ericson**

Ross has been acting since the mid 1990s and has appeared in productions of *Othello*, *Teechers*, *Macbeth*, *A Man for All Seasons*, and *The Little Shop of Horrors* and, more recently, as Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* (Lighthouse, Poole), a Corner man/Bailiff in *Sucker Punch* (Royal Court, London), Ben in *The Dumb Waiter* (The Mill Theatre, Guildford), Number 4 in *Fewer Emergencies* (The Print Room, London), Pembroke/Austria in *King John* (Union Theatre, London), Ned in *Parlour Song* (Cockpit Theatre, London), Jake in *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* (Riverside Studios, London) and The Stage Manager in *Our Town* (Apollo Theatre Company, Touring).

Ross is the resident playwright of **Grist to the Mill Productions**. Among his writing credits are a stage adaptation of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* – which has been optioned by LA Theatre Works in California – *Punchline*, *Life*, *The Autumn of Han* and the critically acclaimed, and OffWestend Awards nominated, *Casualties*, which is published by Methuen Drama. His solo-show *The Unknown Soldier* sold-out its run at Edfringe 2016 and his most recent play *Gratiano* received 4 and 5 star reviews in Edfringe 2017. www.rossericson.co.uk



Costume: **Elizabeth Cooke**

Elizabeth is a costumer with over five years of experience working on theatre, dance and acrobatics. With a Ba (Hons) in Costume from the Arts University Bournemouth, her previous costumes credits include *Touched* by Remix at the Southbank Centre London, and *A Town Is Bourne* at Shelly Theatre, Bournemouth.

<http://costumecooke.blogspot.com/>

Amour and Weapon construction: **Philip Dell**

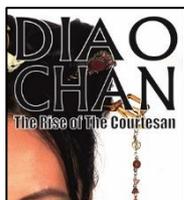


Actor & Producer: **Michelle Yim**

Michelle is a British-East-Asian actor and graduated from ALRA. Theatre: *DiaoChan: The Rise of the Courtesan* (UK Tour); *From Shore to Shore* (Freedom Studios, Leeds); *The Autumn of Han* (UK Tour); *Arrivals* (NI tour); *The King and I* (Theatre at the Mill); *The Translator* (play-reading, Soho theatre) & *Writers Pathway Project* (play-readings, Octagon Bolton). She has also appeared in numerous short films and in small roles on TV (*Sherlock & Blue Murder*), and works as a voice over artist in English, Cantonese and Mandarin.

She is also one of the founders of **Red Dragonfly Productions**, which strives to bring stories from the East and Far East to a British and European audience. Working in collaboration with **Grist to the Mill Productions**, the team has started on a three-year programme to bring three classic Chinese stories to the British stage. *The Autumn of Han* 2014-2015 and *DiaoChan: The Rise of the Courtesan* 2015-2016 have now successfully toured the UK and the third year saw *Monkey and The White Bone Demon* grace the British stage in 2019. Red Dragonfly also encourages and nurtures new BEA and BSA playwrights through their annual new-writing competition *Taking Flight Festival*.

www.reddragonflyproductions.co.uk



'Beautifully realised, captivating piece of theatre.'

★★★★★ **LondonTheatre1 on *DiaoChan: The Rise of the Courtesan***

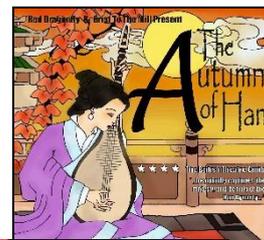


'An exquisite little piece of theatre, a respectful bow to the era with an aura of authenticity and intrigue.'

★★★★★ **Everything Theatre on *DiaoChan: The Rise of the Courtesan***

'A wonderful experience to explore the culture and traditions of ancient China through their own mythology, in a manner that will appeal to everyone.'

★★★★★ **British Theatre Guide on *The Autumn of Han***



'I cried twice and lost count of the times I laughed... it hits all the right notes'

★★★★★ **Everything Theatre on *Taking Flight New Writing Festival 2017***



'Fast paced... with much entertainment... Red Dragonfly Productions has exceeded expectations'

★★★★★ **LiveTheatreUK on *Taking Flight New Writing Festival 2017***



Grist to the Mill was founded in 2012 with a specific aim to bring new writing to the world's stages. Resident writer **Ross Ericson** has had noted success with his critically acclaimed adaptation of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* and his play *Casualties*, which was nominated for Best New Play at the OffWestend Awards and published by Methuen. Grist also co-produced *The Autumn of Han* and *DiaoChan* with Red Dragonfly. 5 stars *The Unknown Soldier* **sold-out** it's run at Edinburgh Fringe Festival 2016 and is also published by Methuen Bloomsbury.

www.gristtheatre.co.uk



'If you don't ever want to see another WW1 play, then you want to see *this*. Superb!'

★★★★★ **FringeGuru on *The Unknown Soldier***

'An unmissable and thought-provoking play that has so much relevance in today's society'

★★★★★ **Edinburgh Festival Mag on *The Unknown Soldier***

'An original perspective on a story we think we all know, and offer a reminiscence that... is poignant and thought-provoking'

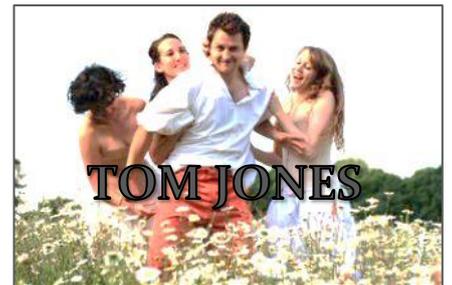
★★★★★ **The Independent on *The Unknown Soldier***

'It's not about glory or futility, it's about the loyalty forged between friends'

★★★★★ **The Scotsman on *The Unknown Soldier***

'The quality of the adaptation and the wit of the cast ensure that... it makes for a thoroughly entertaining evening'

★★★★★ **The Public Reviews on *Tom Jones***



Casualties 2013 at Park Theatre, Photo by Simon Annand



**Simon Annand
(The Half) –
"Contained, but
Epic"**



'*Casualties* is perfectly executed... and will easily leave you reeling.'

★★★★★ **What's on Stage on *Casualties***

'A play of extremely high standard both in writing, direction and performance.'

★★★★★ **LiveTheatre.co on *Casualties***

'Wonderful piece of work... would have gladly gone back for more'

★★★★★ **One Stop Arts on *Casualties***

'Be prepared to be harrowed, to be moved to tears and to fall in love with the characters'

★★★★★ **Remotegoat on *Casualties***