

# ALL IS CALM:

## THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE OF 1914

### STUDY GUIDE



by Peter Rothstein  
Vocal Arrangements by Erick Lichte and  
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directed by Melissa Rain Anderson

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## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

### ELA STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.9-10.6 Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.11-12.1-3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

### SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

Objective 9.12.3: Explain the involvement of the United States in World War I.

Objective 9.12.4: Describe the causes and impact of the intervention by the United States in World War I.

Objective 11.4.2: Describe military advances during the era of World War I and their impact on the economy of the United States.

Objective 11.4.3: Explain the rejection of world leadership by the United States after World War I.

### NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

TH.Re7.1 Perceive and analyze artistic work.

TH.Re8.1 Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

TH.Re9.1 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

TH.Cn10.1 Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

TH.Cn11.1 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

**ASF wishes to thank Peter Rothstein and Theatre Latté Da for allowing us to share their play guide resources.**



The cast of *All is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914*. Photograph by Dan Norman.

## PLOT

A remarkable true story from the Western Front, Christmas, 1914. In a silence amid the combat, a soldier steps into No Man’s Land singing “Silent Night.” *All Is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914* relives an astounding moment in history when Allied troops and German soldiers laid down their arms to celebrate the holiday together, sharing food and drink, playing soccer, and singing carols. This dramatic retelling weaves together firsthand accounts of 30 World War I soldiers with patriotic tunes, trench songs, and Christmas carols.

## CHARACTERS

The cast of *All is Calm* is comprised of ten male actors who play a variety of British, Irish, German, and French soldiers.

## SETTING

The play begins in the United Kingdom, as young men are encouraged to join the fight against Germany and its allies in the “war to end all wars.” The action moves to the battlefield, where conditions are dire, yet most men believe that the conflict will be over soon. As winter approaches, the hope for armistice grows dim. While a call for cessation of hostilities from Pope Benedict XV is ignored by Generals, spontaneous unofficial truces spring up across the front lines. These events are titled the Christmas Truce of 1914, and show the world that even soldiers encamped in bloody battle could show peace and compassion to their fellow man.

## ABOUT PETER ROTHSTEIN

Peter Rothstein has directed 72 mainstage productions for Theater Latté Da, including 11 world premieres. Other recent collaborations include the Guthrie Theater, the Children's Theater Company, Minnesota Opera, the Illusion Theater, Ten Thousand Things, Minnesota Orchestra, Utah Shakespeare Festival, Seattle's 5th Avenue Theater, and Asolo Rep. He is the creator of *All is Calm: The Christmas Truce of 1914* and *Steerage Song*—a docu-musical created in collaboration with Dan Chouinard. Peter was named the 2015 Artist of the Year by the Star Tribune, Theater Artist of the Year by Lavender, and Best Director by City Pages. He has received nine Ivey Awards and has been awarded grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, Theatre Communications Group, the Minnesota State Arts Board, and the McKnight Foundation. He holds a B. A. in Music and Theater from St. John's University and a Master of Fine Arts in Directing from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Playwright Peter Rothstein

## CREATING *ALL IS CALM: THE CHRISTMAS TRUCE OF 1914*

I studied World War I in high school and college, but I don't remember reading about the Christmas Truce in any of my textbooks. If I had, I certainly would have remembered. This extraordinary event took place in 1914, the first year of the war, and was never repeated. Thousands of men put down their guns and left their trenches to meet their enemies in No Man's Land. They exchanged gifts of tobacco, rum, and chocolates; even photographs of loved ones. They sang songs, played a game of soccer, and buried each other's dead. Upon orders from above, they eventually returned to their trenches and re-instigated a war that would last four more years. So why did I not learn of this remarkable event? The propaganda machine of war is powerful, and news of soldiers fraternizing across enemy lines humanize the Germans and readily undermine public support for the war. The heroes of this story are the lowest of the ranks — the young, the hungry, the cold, and the optimistic — those who acted with great courage to put down their guns, overcoming a fear that placed a gun in their hands in the first place. Their story puts a human face on war, and that's the story I hope to tell.

In 2005, I attended a Cantus Christmas concert. I was struck by not only their remarkable sound, but also how their work was pushing the boundaries of chamber music in the ways Theater Latté Da was pushing the boundaries of musical theater. I approached Cantus about collaborating on a piece about the Christmas Truce. They immediately said yes, and our work began. I am interested in creating performance where the content dictates the form. In the creative process I continually ask myself, "If the characters were left to their own devices, how would they tell their story? What language, what tools were available to them?" There was our answer — radio. Radio was critical to military operations; it was the primary means of mass communication and mass entertainment. Our piece would be a radio musical drama, using only the tools of radio: music and text. The music ranges from trench songs to patriotic and sentimental tunes, as well as Christmas music from the participating countries. The text is taken from a wide range of sources including letters, journals, official war documents, poetry, grave stone inscriptions — even an old radio broadcast. One of the reasons I love working in theater, versus film or television, is because the theater is a two-way street. It asks the audience to engage their imagination in order to complete the story. So, here are the words and songs of these remarkable men. Completing the story, putting a human face on war — well, that's up to you. To the thousands of men who changed history, thank you. May we do your story justice.

— Peter Rothstein



An English trench on the Western Front.

**“God Save the King”:** His Majesty King George the Fifth, leader of the United Kingdom and India. He led his nation during World War I against the Central Forces.

**Kaiser:** Kaiser Wilhelm II, German Emperor and King of Prussia. In his effort to increase Germany’s world standing, the Kaiser led his nation into a global war that ended with his abdication and exile on November 9, 1918.

**Trench Warfare:** Combat in which opposing armies fight in trenches, long ditches, facing each other. This type of warfare is often associated with the Western Front of World War I, as French and British forces dug in against the advancing German troops. This type of warfare was particularly brutal on soldiers, who lived in deplorable, vermin-infested conditions and faced continuous bombardment by their enemies.

**No Man’s Land:** The area between trenches that belonged to neither side. Warfare often broke out between the trenches, with armies charging towards the enemy with bayonets. Later in the war, chemical warfare replaced much of the fighting across No Man’s Land.

**Iron Rations:** An emergency ration comprised of preserved foods that troops ate when they were cut off from regular supplies.

**Allied Forces:** Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and the United States formed the allied forces of World War I. They fought the Central Forces, which included Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria.

**Armistice:** A formal agreement between opposing armies to stop fighting.

**Truce:** A suspension of fighting.

**Fritz and Tommy:** The slang names for German and British soldiers, respectively.

**Parapet:** Refers to the top edge of the trench; a dangerous place to be as it exposed one to the opposing army’s fire.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. *All is Calm* takes place in the trenches of WWI. What do you know about WWI? What was life like in the trenches? What do you think the atmosphere between the opposing forces' camps was like?
2. *All is Calm* is set during Christmas in 1914. The soldiers fighting in the trenches were far away from home and lived in deplorable conditions, and yet they tried their best to celebrate the holiday. Why was it so important for soldiers to celebrate? How do you think soldiers could replicate their families' holiday celebrations in a warzone?



Soldiers of the London Rifle Brigade pose with German Saxons of the 104th and 106th Regiments on Christmas Day, 1914.

### POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. *All is Calm* has a unique structure: There are no central characters and the action shifts quickly between multiple perspectives. Was this structure effective? How did this presentation affect your perspective and understanding of the story? How might your understanding be different if the story had been staged as a more traditional narrative?
2. The Christmas Truce was never repeated during the next four years of bloody warfare. Why? Do you think pressure from their commanders stopped the celebrations, or do you think something fundamental changed in the soldiers?

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. On Your Feet: Soldiers from all sides of the conflict memorialized their experiences in the form of poetry. In small groups, choose a poem written by a WWI soldier, such as "In Flanders Fields" by John McCrae or "Dulce et Decorum Est" by Wilfred Owen. Work with your group to stage and present the poem to your classmates. How will your group highlight the evocative language and stirring emotion of the poem? Will all group members speak in unison, or will you divide the text? What theatrical techniques will you use to bring the poem to life for your audience?
2. At Your Seat: During the war, letters were one of the only ways soldiers could communicate with their family and friends. Put yourself in the place of one of the soldiers after the Christmas Truce and write a letter to a loved one. How would you explain the events of the day to them? Did the Truce change your perspective on the war or on the enemy? How did the Truce affect your actions moving forward?