

# LAURA DALY, THE STORM CONE

BY NICHOLAS BLINCOE

I was trying to describe Laura Daly's new work, *The Storm Cone*, to a friend and told her that it was a ghost symphony for brass. The music is haunting, as brass music can be haunting – low and soulful and keening. It begins with a ten minute overture which contains all of the work's themes, followed by a twenty minute breakdown of these themes which introduce voices, snatches of songs like "Jerusalem", men and women humming and singing, as well as archival elements, such as fragments of speeches. Taken together, this ghost symphony evokes a working class history of the years between the wars. The 1920s and 1930s were a time of peace, and we think about the excitement of flappers, the age of jazz, of Cubism and Art Deco, Chanel and Surrealism, and above all, perhaps, the birth of Hollywood. But all this excitement feels like a fever dream: something worse was happening, if not out in the open, then somewhere deep beneath the surface.

Daly took her title from a poem by Rudyard Kipling. It was written in 1932 and is full of the presentiment of a war that Kipling is certain is on its way. The poem now seems spookily prescient, but Kipling was not psychic. In 1932, Europe had been at peace for thirteen years, and was to enjoy another seven years before the hell of the Second World War. Why didn't it feel like a peace? A couple of the titles of the individual pieces that make up *The Storm Cone* are drawn from Kipling's poem: Dawn is Very Far, Twixt Blast and Blast. Daly worked with composer Lucy Pankhurst, who developed musical themes for Daly's narrative of this interregnum, from the armistice, the demobilisation of the men, and the return to the factories.

The factory and colliery bands, which are such a feature of Britain's industrial cities, reached a peak in these years with 20,000 registered brass bands. *The Storm Cone* goes on to evoke the General Strike, the Hunger marches, leading finally to the new war. When Daly described the piece, she told me it was a description of the edge around an absence. I wondered, is this what Kipling felt? Did he feel the building pressure as the edge of something? Something he knew was coming? A dark future?

Kipling's poem reminds me of W B Yeats's 1920 poem, The Second Coming. "Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned." Like Daly, Yeats is describing an edge, whether the edge of a tide or of a circling flight path. The future lies beyond this limit; the dark unknown.

Is this also what Wittgenstein was trying to say, in the first and the last words of his post-war philosophy book, *The Tractatus* (1919)? "The world is all that is the case ... whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." Which is to say, science can describe everything, but the idea of "everything" already feels like an edge, beyond which there is an awful silence. Wittgenstein was broken by the First World War. He spent the 1920s and 30s in revolt from his 1919 book, experimenting with new ways to describe the edges of what could be said, and perhaps delimit the space beyond.

Laura Daly's *The Storm Cone* might be a ghost symphony, but it is also an experience. The app leads you to a ghost bandstand, where ghost musicians have set up their music stands. As I explored *The Storm Cone* during a Beta test, I was stopped by a man taking pieces of scaffolding from the back of his lorry. The way I was holding my phone made him think I was filming him, perhaps as a health and safety exposé of his business. I had to show him what I was seeing: a spectral image of a bandstand that stood beyond his truck. He got it immediately. I continued walking around and around, lost in time. Perhaps, I thought, it is wrong to call it a ghost symphony. The app is really the case: I am really seeing a real digital bandstand, as I listen to real music. I am not circling the ghosts of Kipling, nor the demobbed veterans of the war, nor the industrial brass bands and hunger marchers. I am not haunted by their ghosts. I am haunted by the same thing that haunted all of them: the unearthly feeling of a nothingness just beyond the limit.

**Nicholas Blincoe** is a novelist, filmmaker and historian. He wrote an award-winning trilogy of crime books about Manchester, describing the way that the city's underground clubs and nightlife fed its post-war revival. His most recent book is a history of football in Palestine and Israel, showing how closely sports and politics are intertwined. Blincoe was born in Rochdale, and lives in London.



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