



Black Watch bravehearts

arts

By LINDSAY McPHEE

PEOPLE forget that history is not always made by people in positions of power, says Black Watch playwright Gregory Burke.

"I wanted the soldiers to be promoted accurately in the theatre, rather than just as thugs or stupid boys – they are just people doing a job," he said.

What started as an assignment to follow the story of Scotland's legendary Black Watch regiment in 2004 has turned into a powerful and highly acclaimed docu-drama.

Next month the 10-man play, based on Burke's interviews with former soldiers who served in Iraq, will take audiences through the history and experiences of the Black Watch as part of the Perth

International Arts Festival.

Since opening in 2006, it has won multiple awards and was voted one of the best plays on Broadway by New York critics.

Burke said *Black Watch* was not about the polemics of the Iraq war, but about the male psyche's yearning for a strong identity and shedding light on experiences of those whose stories had not yet been told.

"John Tiffany the director, and I didn't want to give the audience this "isn't war terrible" play. People already know this – you're not pulling a rabbit out of a hat by saying "war is bad."

Burke said the play's development was an organic process, with rehearsals,

remarkably, starting without a formal script.

"All John had in his head was that he wanted it to be like the Edinburgh Military Tattoo," he said.

"John and Steven Hoggett, associate director movement, had to devise a non-verbal language because these guys don't talk about their feelings.

"You'd ask them how it felt when their friend was blown up and they'd just say 'yeah, it was bad'."

A highly physical play, *Black Watch* also uses song, music and extraordinary choreography combined with explosions and strobe lighting to explore what life in the Black Watch means to its soldiers.

Consequently, Burke's overriding fear is that one of the performers is injured.

"There are no understudies – I'm terrified someone gets hurt – but that's just me, I worry."

The proof of the pudding, they say, is in the eating and according to Tiffany the team had no idea if the production would "communicate anything" until its first performance.

"It became apparent that there was a real connection being made and that we were telling a story that the audience desperately wanted to hear," he said.

More importantly, Burke said, was the reaction of the soldiers themselves.

"They were really knocked out – they loved it. They all said they didn't think anyone cared.

"Soldiers I hadn't even interviewed came up to me and said they recognised themselves. It just worked."

Black Watch runs from February 8 to 17 at Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre Bookings 9484 1133.



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Gregory Burke



A 10-strong band of actors take to the stage to the tale of the soldiers of Black Watch at Perth International Arts Festival