

EDINBURGH EVENING NEWS

Black Watch

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THOM DIBDIN

FORREST HILL DRILL HALL

THE first strains of the bagpipes had just started for the Tattoo on Saturday night when the curtain went up on this alternative history of one of Scotland's best know regiments.

Indeed, it seemed at first as if this was going to be a mini- tattoo.

Saltires were projected around the Drill Hall, uplifting military music was piped in, and the audience were on banks of seating on either side, just like the real thing on the Castle Esplanade.

What you see, and what you get are two very different things, however.

Playwright Gregory Burke has succeeded in getting deep in behind the showy pomp of military life. He has found the real squaddies who joined up from Fife and Tayside to fight in the Army along with their mates. And brought their story out on to the stage.

It is powerful stuff. And what makes it even more powerful, is that he uses the soldiers' very own words. Verbatim. It tells how Cammy (Brian Ferguson), an ex-soldier with the Black Watch, is contacted by a researcher and how he persuades a group of his fellow ex-soldiers to meet up with Burke, and how they tell him what it was like.

These could be any group of six pals enjoying a Sunday session down the pub.

All through the play, it comes back to this group, portrayed with utter realism by a fantastic cast who do not miss a single beat throughout.

By transposing their reactions to Burke's questions with scenes from their Army life, he succeeds in saying much more than the mere words.

The scenes from Iraq cut into the play like a six-inch blade tearing through red baize. At times, it is about the tension of sitting, five of you, in a space the size of a pool table, in a 40-degree heat, under fire, bored and scared. It's about putting down the porn before an embedded journalist pays a visit. It's about seeing your mates tumbling, bloody, through the air. Dead.

But mostly, this is about young Scots and what they do. The banter, the tricks, the relationships between the men, their sergeant (Paul Higgins) and the officer (Peter Forbes), how the new recruits like Kenzie (Ryan Fletcher) react to those, like Fraz (Emun Eliot), who are serving a second tour in Iraq.

There's politics in there too. The politics of the Black Watch being subsumed into a bigger force in the Army. The politics of sending them to war in Iraq in the first place. The politics of fighting an enemy which employs suicide bombs in its arsenal.

And there's the golden thread history. In a scene of breathtaking precision, Cammy talks and walks through the Black Watch's history as he is dressed and undressed in the uniforms which it has worn over the years.

This is exactly the sort of theatre that the National Theatre of Scotland should be putting on. It is theatre for the people whose history it is, portrayed with panache, humour and utter, bloody, realism.

• Until August 27