

Scottish battle cry gets to the heart of the matter

Edinburgh

Black Watch

★★★★★

For a split second you think you might have wandered into the wrong place. With the bagpipes blaring and search lights roving it looks as if you are about to see a smaller version of the Tattoo. But it is an entirely different kind of military and theatrical spectacle that is taking place in the University of Edinburgh Drill Hall, where Gregory Burke's extraordinary, passionate play burrows into the lives of the men who have served in Iraq in the Black Watch.

The Black Watch is not so much a regiment as a way of life, a state of mind. It is also no longer in existence: it suffered enforced amalgamation with other regiments in 2004, just as the regiment was relieving American forces at Camp Dogwood in Iraq.

Based on extensive interviews with men who have served in Iraq on two tours, *Black Watch* avoids the pitfalls

of most documentary theatre, which allows us liberal theatre-goers to take a cosy gander in the zoo. Instead, it places the audience in the very heart of the war zone. John Tiffany's storming, heart-stopping production is all disorienting blood, guts and thunder, threaded through with the history and songs of the regiment and intercut with lyrical moments of physical movement, like some great dirty ballet of pulsating machismo and terrible tenderness.

It's as if you can see inside these foul-mouthed, gun-toting, porn-watching jocks. It makes you understand not just the soldiers but the culture from which they come, where loyalty and comradeship go cheek by jowl with the Neanderthal. These young men know better than our politicians what is going on in Iraq. "Bullying, not

soldiering," says one after spending four hours watching the Americans bombing the hell out of a small village.

This is a mature and complex piece of political theatre – fierce, passionate and unguarded – that makes connections between what happens here with what happens there, and indicts a government that so blithely squanders not only lives but all the things that make us human. "It takes 300 years to build an army, and it only takes three years to destroy it," says one character. In Iraq, both a country and a civilisation have been destroyed. In two hours, Burke and the National Theatre of Scotland shine a spotlight on something that has been lost forever.

Lyn Gardner

Until August 27. Box office: 0131-228 1404.



Soldier's tale ... Ryan Fletcher in *Black Watch*