



Coalface of war: Paul James Corrigan in the National Theatre of Scotland's *Black Watch*

From the pits to darkness of war

THE vast industrial space that has become the refurbished Carriageworks arts centre is still haunted by the ghosts of working railway men. It is the perfect venue for the National Theatre of Scotland's show about men plucked from the mine pits of Scotland to find in the army some of the identity and camaraderie they can no longer find at home, except in the pub.

They join the Black Watch regiment, with its centuries-old tradition, and are sent to a new war, in Iraq, that they do not understand. There is a great scene in which this collection of hard-swearing, hard-fighting but basically innocent Scottish lads watch, in fascinated awe, a four-hour US aerial bombardment of a small Iraqi village. "This isn't fighting," protests one. "It's bullying."

For Australian audiences there are many Anzac resonances. Pick up ordinary working-class blokes, give them a legend to identify with, and then send them away to fight an overseas war between foreign powers. The

Black Watch

By Gregory Burke. Directed by John Tiffany. National Theatre of Scotland, Carriageworks Bay 17, Sydney, January 11. Tickets: \$70. Bookings: 1300 723 038. Until January 26.

play recalls the tradition of soldiers in the trenches at Gallipoli wondering what part they were supposed to be playing in the greater British military scheme. It's people from the colonies going to war: the way empires have functioned since the Caesars.

This powerful production is in the great tradition of British working-class theatre, from Joan Littlewood and Peter Cheeseman in England in the 1960s to the legendary John McGrath in Scotland. It has the vestiges of its origin in a verbatim theatre project, in a series of scenes in which a researcher interviews returned soldiers in a pub, and that is very affecting. But it goes beyond that, with

scripted scenes of the lads trying to cope in Iraq, traditional Black Watch songs, and a series of scenes in which this fine company performs, with music (Davey Anderson) and movement (Steven Hoggett), the experiences of all soldiers in war.

The excellent cast plays with an earthy naturalism in the scripted scenes and with energetic precision in the dance scenes. One of the most emotional is one of the most formal, when the boys receive news from home and mime their loneliness as, one by one, they let their letters drop to the floor. There is a physically and musically powerful finale in which they keep marching, falling and then getting up again, in a relentless military dance that recapitulates centuries of tragically pointless heroism.

This is a show that attacks war but movingly celebrates the lives of the unwitting young men who are sent off to fight and die. John McCallum