

Black Watch

Bryce Hallett, reviewer
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"I HOPE the government knows what it has got us into. I am not sure they fully understand the risks," says the officer, reciting an email to his wife back home. "The jocks are well and are coming at it with their usual gallows humour but the marines we have replaced here have taken nine dead and nearly 200 wounded since July. I hope we do better."

The "jocks" are the young recruits in Scotland's oldest Highland regiment Black Watch, a predominantly working-class institution steeped in tradition and engendering a keen sense of purpose and pride. In one scene the unit - ill-prepared and thinking up manoeuvres on the run - is in Dogwood larking and talking about mortar attacks, being immortalised in movies, sex, heat and hydration.

They form a brash, impressionable, rough and ready tribe caught in a military maelstrom they know all too little about. The frustration, boredom and pain of their predicament is rammed home through the intimacy and immediacy of the National Theatre of Scotland's astonishingly physical ensemble production. Gregory Burke's time-shifting play asks many questions and is all the stronger for the emotional rawness, humour and truthfulness in which they are couched. What was it like in Iraq? Did you worry about having to shoot people? How do you get over seeing your friends die?

The docudrama draws on the real-life experiences of a group of Black Watch lads to illuminate what it means to be part of the fight against terrorism and, moreover, an ailing regiment that prides itself on appearance, marching and what it calls the "golden thread" running through its history since its formation almost 300 years ago.

We are told that the soldiers are not fighting for Britain, the government or even Scotland for that matter. They fight for their regiment and for their mates. Initially, the device of the interviewer/writer and his subjects can register as obvious and contrived, but fortunately the actors are so convincing, skilful and in the moment that the effect is natural rather than studied.

The director, John Tiffany, and his associates Steven Hoggett (movement) and Davey Anderson (music) have crafted a spirited and explosive production that is never less than absorbing. The audience is seated either side of a vast corridor that serves as a recreation room, battlefield and parade ground flanked by scaffold towers on which CCTV monitors are hung and show images of orators, bombings and, briefly, pornography. The production, greatly enhanced by Gareth Fry's sound design and Colin Grenfell's lighting, combines movement, music, traditional Scottish military ballads and film.

There are a number of brilliantly choreographed scenes, including the rapid-fire history lesson of the Black Watch's changing uniforms through the ages in which the pivotal Cammy (Paul Rattray) becomes a flexible fashion dummy. The storytelling is brisk and inventive. As the regiment and the unity and unique identity that it represents is deemed to be knackered, the future looks desperately uncertain as the production builds to the spectacle and shock of a suicide bombing.

Black Watch's coda is a parade by the young men. There are bagpipes and drums, an intensifying rhythm and pitch, formality and fall. It is simple and heartbreaking, and the opening-night audience was momentarily plunged into stunned silence. The National Theatre of Scotland is a welcome presence in the music-weighted Sydney Festival and, as a dramatic centrepiece, has brought it substance and spine.