



FRINGE THEATRE
NEIL COOPER

**BLACKWATCH,
TRAVERSE THEATRE AT
EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY
DRILL HALL**

★★★★★

THERE'S a sense of event from the very start of Gregory Burke's new collaboration with the National Theatre of Scotland. Part of this is the ramshackle magnificence of its all-too-appropriate venue. Part of it is the swirling pastiche of the Edinburgh Tattoo which ushers us in, only to blow apart any expectations of pomp and circumstance with the most modest of introductions. Mainly, though, it's the sheer brilliance of John Tiffany's production, which, in form and content, must be considered a major tipping point for the potential of what theatre can be in this country.

In its conception it charts military history, and in its delivery it gives a knowing nod to that other much-cited major event of recent theatrical history, *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. That it does so in an utterly 21st-century manner, absorbing a glorious mish-mash of styles into a series of set-pieces to make up one thrilling

whole without ever being self-conscious or sentimental, should be a matter of considerable pride for all concerned. It's also one of the clearest artistic statements yet on the futility of war without ever falling back on the kneejerk liberalism favoured by those with less vision, imagination or creative drive.

It's the simplest of set-ups. A writer comes to interview a gang of ex-squaddies who served two tours of Iraq but then left the army that could have given them security for life. (Which, during Burke's own research, is probably pretty much what happened.) We're then lurched into a series of staged reminiscences which paint a vivid picture of ordinary, unreconstructed cannon-fodder, high on testosterone and locker-room humour – and, on one level, utterly unheroic. Yet the recognition within the piece of the potential for exploitation affords these troops dignity and respect.

Suitably well-drilled, the cast of 10, primarily young, actors works with such controlled vigour as to be faultless, looking and sounding like a real regiment caught in the political crossfire. In particular,

Brian Ferguson – who partly frames things with a narration that takes in an entire regimental history via a series of quick changes on the catwalk – shows considerable fire and mettle, and looks like a major talent in the making.

Much of the play's strength is the way in which it goes beyond the coarse, street-smart poetry of Burke's dialogue by way of a series of stunning moments that prompt smatterings of applause throughout. Songs and video projections are major factors here. Steven Hoggett's choreography is especially effective: married to the emotive swell of pipes and drums, it is aggressively balletic enough to flirt with the homoerotic, and knowing enough to comment on it too.

At last, instead of pussyfooting around with empty rhetoric, this country's theatre-makers have begun to show what political animals they are. *Blackwatch* is an astonishing artistic whirlwind that, despite its localised setting, is utterly international in its approach. The world must see this play. Immediately.
Until August 28.

