

# Privates on parade (and off the rails)

Kate  
Bassett

## Fringe Round-up

*Various venues*  
EDINBURGH

Presented by the new National Theatre of Scotland company in a vast disused drill hall, **Black Watch** is a top ticket at this year's Edinburgh Fringe. Gregory Burke's docudrama is a gritty portrait of the valiant Scots regiment, based on the playwright's interviews with former soldiers who were posted in Iraq and saw their own killed even as politicians back home announced the Black Watch's inglorious end.

What is unexpectedly dramatic and double-edged is that Burke incorporates the interview situation and its simmering tensions. It starts with comic misunderstanding as Burke's stage incarnation walks sheepishly through the pub door, sorely disappointing Brian Ferguson's Cammy and his shorn-headed mates who've been led to expect a bit of skirt. But their distrust of how he will portray them ultimately explodes in a hair-raising assault by the most unstable veteran. These scenes are intercut with flashbacks to Iraq: hanging around, joshing, quarreling, air attacks, getting letters from home.

The drill hall's echoing acoustic is problematic but the scale of the place is exhilaratingly epic, with a bare desert of concrete. The show gets away with its stylized, balletic-meets-bodyslamming battles (choreographed by Steven Hoggett of Frantic Assembly) because the acting is excellent and authentically mouthy. Director John Tiffany and designer Laura Hopkins also inject electrifyingly imaginative images. The pub's scarlet pool table suddenly rips open to reveal two squaddies crawling out into the air. The fatal explosion is also unforgettable, with bodies suddenly hanging from ropes 20 feet up, falling in slow motion for a seeming eternity.

Docudramas are everywhere this year. **Unprotected** is a study of a different kind of

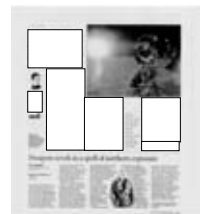
danger zone: a collage of re-enacted verbatim interviews with Liverpool prostitutes, outreach workers, politicians, cops and – most harrowingly – the mothers of two street walkers who were murdered. Staged with understated acumen by fast-rising Nina Raine, using a scattering of plastic chairs and projected cityscapes, this should not be missed.

Also at the Traverse, **Pumpgirl** is a three-hander of interwoven monologues dealing with a gang rape. Though writer Abbie Spallen is heavily influenced by Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie*, she's a talent to nurture with vivid powers of description, and Mike Bradwell's production is characteristically fine-tuned.

The Pleasance Theatre's star-studded comedy thriller, **Marlon Brando's Corset**, with Les Dennis (doing his best) and Mike McShane (desperately hyped up), proves to be complete garbage plot-wise. One presumes it's not intentionally ironic that the murder victim, a scriptwriter, keeps harping on about the dumb celebrity-led rubbish everyone churns out these days.

The Assembly Rooms' big play, Tim Fountain's adaptation of the 1960s movie **Midnight Cowboy**, following Charles Aitken's dull Texan hunk to the Big Apple and into male prostitution, is a string of clichés too. Considerably more interesting at the same venue is **(I Am) Nobody's Lunch**, devised by Manhattan experimentalists The Civilians. This satiric cabaret taps into contemporary America's fears and ignorance, using verbatim vox pop interviews that morph into peculiarly catchy songs.

*k.bassett@independent.co.uk*  
Traverse (0131 228 1404); Pleasance (0131 556 6550); Assembly (0131 226 2428), at Edinburgh Fringe Festival, to 28 Aug





'Black  
Watch' gets  
away with  
its balletic  
battle  
scenes  
because the  
acting is  
believably  
mouthy



**Take aim:**  
Ryan Fletcher  
leads the Scottish  
regiment in gritty  
Iraq docudrama  
'Black Watch'  
GERAINT LEWIS

