

Reaping war's bitter harvest

Two very different plays offer powerful and moving examinations of the human cost of conflict to those on the front line



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WHEN Vicky Featherstone was appointed director of the new National Theatre of Scotland two years ago, one of the first potential projects she announced was a new play by Gregory Burke based on the real-life experience of the Black Watch regiment in Iraq. Even she can hardly have dared hope, though, that the idea would finally come to birth in such a magnificent, moving and mind-blowing first night as the one that raised the roof of the old Forrest Road Drill Hall on Saturday evening.

Based on dozens of interviews with present and former Black Watch soldiers, the play adopts a fairly simple flash-back, flash-forward structure. On one hand, there is the tense encounter in a grubby bar somewhere in Fife or Dundee between the nervous playwright and the former Black Watch men whose experience he is about to mine and exploit for his next show.

On the other hand, there is the fragmented story of the men during their time in Iraq,

suffering, arguing, and in some cases dying, as they seek to replace a much larger American force in one of the most dangerous zones of a war about which many of them have doubts – and at a time when, back home, their 300-year-old regiment is facing dissolution.

Woven through both stories there is the “golden thread” of Black Watch history as it is passed on to each new recruit, represented here by a rich vein of soldiers’ songs, visual imagery, and stunning, sometimes heart-rending movement sequences by the associate director, Steven Hoggett.

People will argue, of course – or should – about the precise meaning of a play that pulls no punches in describing the discomfort, disillusion and suffering of the men of the Black Watch in Iraq, but has little to say about the suffering they inflict, or about the dark strain of colonial savagery in the regiment’s history. And the ending of the show is undoubtedly a shade too drawn

out, too in love with its own gift for music and movement.

What’s undeniable, though, is the breathtaking theatrical brilliance with which the director, John Tiffany, and his team bring the main sequence of Burke’s story to life, in the great echoing space of the Drill Hall, blending sound, music, light, movement, and the occasional huge projected video image, with the tremendous live performances of a brilliantly-chosen team of ten young Scottish actors, each of them apparently driven by an overwhelming sense of purpose and history, and of superbly disciplined physical energy.

The technical quality of this production is flawless, soaring up to and beyond the gold standard we can expect from our National Theatre. Far more important, though, is the ground-shaking energy with which it announces the arrival of the National Theatre as a force that can reassert a strong, grass-roots Scottish perspective on parts of our story which,





until now, have been filtered mainly through institutions of the British state.

Burke's play does not represent the last word on the history of Scotland's most famous regiment. But it does represent a massive step forward in our understanding and recognition of a vital part of our national story, and – potentially – of the relationship between Scottish theatre and the widest possible popular audience, both at home, and far beyond our shores.

Much less ambitious than *Black Watch* in scale, but almost equal to it in theatrical force and impact, is the other great reality-based show about war and peace on this year's Fringe, presented by the Royal Court Theatre at the Pleasance. *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* – already a huge success in London – is a profoundly moving 90-minute monologue based entirely on the journals, poems and e-mails of Rachel Corrie, a 23-year-old American peace activist who died under an Israeli bulldozer

in Gaza in 2003.

The show is beautifully directed by Alan Rickman, with a fine design by Hildegard Bechtler evoking the broken walls of the Palestinian city of Rafah; and it boasts a beautiful, shimmering performance from young actress Josephine Taylor, who is exactly the same age as Corrie at the time of her death.

The real secret of this show's huge success, though, lies in the astonishing quality of Corrie's writing, about life at home with her family and as a college



Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* pulls no punches illustrating the effect serving in Iraq has on troops

Picture: Jon Savage





student, about her growing commitment to peace activism, and then finally about the last, passionate two months of her life as a volunteer in Gaza.

Corrie's commitment to the Palestinian cause was complete and unambiguous; and in her last, heart-stopping e-mail home – honest, harrowing, perhaps one of the key political documents of our time – she even found herself beginning to question her lifelong commitment to non-violence, as she witnessed the suffering and hopelessness of the families around her.

What remains in the mind and heart, though, in the end, is the depth of Corrie's distress at the sheer pain and injustice of the world she had inherited.

By the end of *My Name Is*

Rachel Corrie I was weeping, along with much of the audience, not with pity, but with a sense of shame that we should have left to the next generation – the best and brightest of Britain, America, and every other nation – a world so disfigured by inhumanity and greed and so abject in its failure to keep its great post-war promises of security and justice, to all the people of the earth.

● Susan Mansfield's interviews with Rachel Corrie's family and Gregory Burke, which appeared in *The Scotsman* on 15 July and 29 July, can be found at www.scotsman.com.

Black Watch runs until 27 August. Tomorrow, 8.30pm. My Name is Rachel Corrie until 28 August. Today 5.50pm.

