



BARRACK-ROOM BALLADS

In **Black Watch** at the Drill Hall a soldier uses a word we haven't heard for a long time in connection with war. 'They're looking for glory,' says the officer, 'and they seem to be finding it in martyrdom. Glory, however, is something which my boys are very unlikely to emerge with.'

Instead the boys of the 'Gallant Forty-Twa' are beset by the controversy around the war in Iraq and demoralised by their amalgamation into a new, single Scottish super-regiment. And that's not all. 'The difference in the firepower and the kit, it's that much,' says one of soldiers. 'This isnae f---ng fighting,' says another. 'This is just plain old-fashioned bullying, like.'

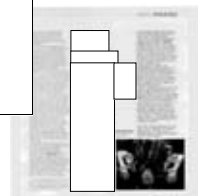
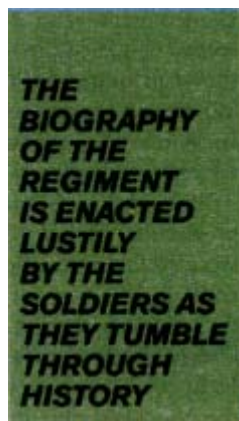
For his new play Gregory Burke, author of the 2001 festival hit *Gagarin Way*, interviewed **Black Watch** soldiers who had served in Iraq. The result, while not a journalistic record, is a way of letting us hear the voices of the soldiers themselves as they tell their story, beautifully, in pithy language enriched with copious amounts of swearing.

It's also an 'unauthorised biography of the regiment', words that made my eyes roll back

in anticipation of deadly boredom. Biography of a regiment? The kind of thing only military historians might read? But this is the unauthorised version, enacted lustily by the soldiers as they tumble through history and in and out of the various uniforms the regiment has worn, responding in laconic modern Scots to Lord Elgin when he comes galloping out of the 14th century with a sporran the size of a Shetland pony and booms, in an Oxbridge accent, 'Wha'll follae the Bruce?' There is also a fair bit of singing.

Maybe it's a specifically Celtic way of connecting with history, but Scots often sing when they get together, mixing traditional songs with rock 'n' roll. So here, as they charge around Camp Dogwood, the soldiers belt out 'Twa Recruitin' Sergeants', and at the climax of the play, when time is visually slowed as three dying soldiers fall through the air, the sound of a Gaelic dirge delivers a requiem where speech would be hollow.

The actors burn with restless energy and John Tiffany's production is robustly inventive, with a pool table doubling as a Warrior





armoured vehicle, and the hangar-like space of the Drill Hall vibrating to the sound of mortar attacks. Completely brilliant.

Best known as the 1969 film starring John Voight and Dustin Hoffman, **Midnight Cowboy** makes its debut as a play at the Assembly Rooms. It's the story of Joe Buck, the handsome Texan cowboy and 'first-class buckner' who heads to New York to make his fortune as a straight male hustler. Sexual politics in the days before female sex tourism are against him, and soon, penniless, he hooks up with a 'manager', Ratso Rizzo, a down-and-out who talks the talk.

Charles Aitken is luminous as the heartbreakingly naive Buck, though Con O'Neill has a harder job breaking Ratso out of the mould created by Dustin Hoffman in the film. His accent, too, veers between Brooklyn and somewhere nearer Enniskillen. But the love that develops between the two shines through this otherwise slightly thin

production by John Clancy.

Inside the Udderbelly, a festival venue in the shape of a giant upside-down purple cow, its udder pricking the sky like the spires of a new kind of church, Stewart Lee directs **Talk Radio** by the American comic Eric Bogosian – Lee's first play since all the hullaballo of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*. *Talk Radio* covers similar 'reality media' territory, this time shock-jock radio in the 1980s. Phil Nicol plays Barry Champlain, a jabber-jockey on WTLK's 'Night Talk', while seven off-stage actors call in as 37 ordinary nutters. Some winning vignettes – I loved Garbage Disposal Woman – don't, unfortunately, add up to a meaningful experience.

'Black Watch', Drill Hall, Edinburgh (0131 228 1404) to Aug 27; 'Talk Radio', E4 Udderbelly, Edinburgh (0870 745 3083) to Aug 28; 'Midnight Cowboy', Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh (0131 226 2428) to Aug 28



Death without glory
Ryan Fletcher in
'Black Watch'

