

The hit of the Fringe is as tough, daring and battle-hardened as the squaddies it portrays

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Dominic Cavendish reviews Black Watch at Drill Hall

It might seem premature to announce that the most compelling theatre experience of the entire Fringe has already been unveiled, but if there's a more powerful, urgent, perfectly realised piece of work than Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* out there, I'll undertake to run to Baghdad and back.

Dunfermline-born Burke, you may recall, caused quite a sensation five years ago at the Traverse with *Gagarin Way*, a brutally funny thriller about anti-globalisation.

This play, "an unauthorised biography of the legendary Scottish regiment", and based on interviews with former soldiers, once again catches the mood of the moment by allowing some of the toughest, most guarded men in the land to talk frankly, freely - and often filthily - about the disillusionment of their time in Iraq.

Drolly showing his own civilian self (played by Paul Rattray) nervously firing off questions to half a dozen mistrustful and at times menacing ex-squaddies, Burke betrays a refreshing concern not to let things get too worthy.



Creative licence: the soldiers say the war is 'about porn and petrol'

The gallows' humour of fatigued military men has been captured with greater sharpness than most TV crews could muster: life at the hellish Camp Dogwood is blithely compared to "Perth Road [Dundee] on a Saturday night"; the mission cynically summed up as being "about porn and petrol".

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Impartial though the piece is, Burke and director John Tiffany know that to get under their subjects' battle-hardened skin, you also need to be as daring as they are.

Hence, in complement to Davey Anderson's rousing reworkings of old marching songs, physical theatre expert Steven Hoggett has been drafted in to help fill the vast university Drill Hall with tightly choreographed athletic activity. It's like watching a 10-man Tattoo, only there's more room for emotionally expressive manoeuvre.

As the action zips between group interviews in Scotland and the hot, hate-filled reality of Iraq, you're constantly ambushed by the creative team's ingenuity.

An overturned pool table is used to suggest a cramped personnel carrier. One of the soldiers (Brian Ferguson's Cammy) becomes a whirling human mannequin, his body swathed in the different uniforms of the Black Watch down the years.

The routine of opening letters from home turns into an outbreak of private ritualised movements, poignantly eloquent of internal anguish.

Finally, unforgettably, the bloody impact of a suicide bomb is rendered in devastating slow-motion. Here, at last, is an evening that accords the UK's long-suffering soldiery some of the public respect they deserve.

- Until August 27. Tickets: 0131 228 1404