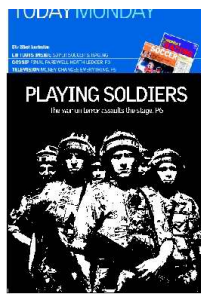


PLAYING SOLDIERS

The war on terror assaults the stage. P6





Closer to the reality of war

THEATRE

Black Watch
Perth Convention Centre
Review: Ron Banks

The moral ambiguities of army life and the war in Iraq come tumbling out in all their messy complexity and confusion in *Black Watch*, the National Theatre of Scotland's flagship production for the Festival.

Staged in the hangar-like space of the Convention Centre, with all the charm of an army drill hall, this fractured narrative of a soldier's life in a modern regiment is at times brutal and confronting — much like army life itself — and occasionally lyrical, tender and poetic.

These contradictory moments of toughness and tenderness underline the inherent theatricality of *Black Watch*, which exploits every artifice of theatre to gain traction for its tale of soldiers under pressure and their very identity as members of a military clan.

While the brutality of modern warfare is reinforced by multi-media imagery, the sudden sounds of bombs in Iraq and flashes of brilliant white light, the production also gives us a history of the *Black Watch*, Scotland's most famous regiment. In a quick-change scenario of historical uniforms the soldiers reveal how their tradition was built over 300 years.

Ironically, as the soldiers reveal in

monologues and encounters with each other, the regiment was being disbanded while its soldiers were on duty in Iraq in 2004. The show begins with a single soldier explaining his simple philosophy of war: he wants to be in the army, even though he recognises that what they really do is bullying. "That's what you have an army for," he says.

Black Watch then proceeds to show how the bullying is done at the regiment's Camp Dogwood in Baghdad. A pool table becomes an armoured vehicle and props at each end of the concrete floor become the soldiers' quarters or platforms for the multi-media action on television.

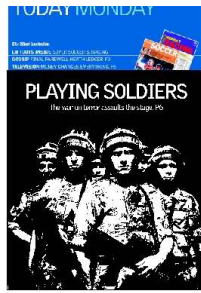
But the audiovisuals are kept to a minimum: this is a play using the basics of theatre — that is, imagination and dialogue.

The soldiers swap backwards and forwards from life in uniform to civilians in a pool hall, where a theatre director is questioning them about the war in Iraq. It's a framing device that enables the soldiers to express their feelings — whether its suspicion of the director's motives, or their own sense of frustration at how being in the army is misunderstood. This is not an overtly political play about what one officer calls "the worst foreign policy disaster in the history of the West" ("but you didn't hear that from me," he adds). The names of Bush and Blair are never mentioned, although those in the audience with an anti-Iraq war bias will discover their

influence around the edges of the soldiers' frustration. Instead, *Black Watch* becomes a compelling account of the moral confusion of war. The soldiers are proud to be in the regiment, proud of its history, and willing to serve their country. Ironically, though, we see that they have left the army and carry with them a sense of disillusionment and even anger. *Black Watch* shows us that war brutalises the humanity of ordinary young men. It also reveals these harsh discoveries can be made amid moments of lyrical beauty in the theatre.

There are some haunting Scottish regimental songs interspersed throughout the expletive-laden dialogue (the f...word is used with more familiarity than a Billy Connolly show) and the choreography of war is crisply sketched with their bodies.

Black Watch tries to do what is probably impossible: give some genuine insights into the psychology of soldiers in a modern theatre of war. It asks all the personal questions of them: how does it feel to fire on the enemy, what's it like to be under attack? The answers somehow seem inadequate. The soldiers try to explain, but the situation is too big, too unstructured, to really give the right answers. Possibly because there are no right answers. At least this stirring, absorbing production brings us closer to the realities of war.



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Black Watch: Contradictory moments of toughness and tenderness.