

# THE TELEGRAPH

## Operation total theatre

(Filed: 23/08/2006)

**The daring theatricality of Iraq War drama 'Black Watch' has made it the hit of the festival, but until the first preview its creators were terrified it wouldn't work. They talk to Dominic Cavendish**

To have one out-and-out triumph on the Fringe may be regarded as fortunate. To pull off the same feat again attests to a rare talent.

Five years ago, Gregory Burke swept all before him with his debut *Gagarin Way*, a brutally funny thriller about anti-capitalism set in a factory in his birthplace town of Dunfermline. This month, once again, he has won hearts and minds with *Black Watch*, the "unauthorised biography of the legendary Scottish regiment". A hot ticket from the day it opened at Edinburgh University's Drill Hall, it now looks like the undisputed highlight of the festival and counts as a feather in the cap of the newly established National Theatre of Scotland.



**Black Watch: the actors underwent punishing training sessions at the hands of a former regimental sergeant-major**

"I warned him: 'Don't get too used to this kind of reaction'," says John Tiffany, who directed both pieces, recalling their earlier success with *Gagarin Way*. "'You won't see anything quite like it again'. Amazingly, we have." If anything, the level of media excitement has been more intense this time round, the public's response - reflected in nightly standing ovations - more emphatically approving.

Offers to take the work further, and bring it to a wider audience, have been flooding in. "Some of the film and TV bids have made me laugh," says Tiffany, who is from Huddersfield. "I've said: 'Have you actually seen the show? It's completely theatrical'."

Though it sounds obvious, it's worth spelling out that the key component of Black Watch's success is its daring theatricality. The script, based on informal conversations Burke had with half a dozen ex-squaddies earlier this year in Fife, didn't fall into a clear shape until the material came into contact with the 10-strong company in rehearsal, during which a whole range of other expressive elements - dance, movement, song and video - were also brought into play.

The result has been a rare example of "total theatre". Every aspect of the show's presentational style has, like the creative team behind it, pulled together to tell the story. Six weeks' intensive sweat and toil has produced a visceral evocation of life for members of the Black Watch during and after their disillusioning operations in Iraq in late 2004 when they were deployed within the "Sunni Triangle", at the cost of five lives.

The show looks so perfectly achieved, it comes as a surprise to learn how doubt-wracked its development was. Sitting at the Traverse, which co-produced the work, Burke, 38, reveals: "There were moments when we looked at each other and thought: What on earth are we doing?" They knew what they didn't want - "I'd seen a lot of 'verbatim' theatre," Tiffany, 34, says, "and although hearing what people actually said has a tremendous power to it, I found some shows very dry emotionally."

They had some models of how they should proceed, especially Joan Littlewood's satirical revue about the First World War *Oh! What a Lovely War* and John McGrath's *The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black Black Oil*, a 1974 survey of the North Sea oil industry. Yet the mechanics of creating work of such a free-spirited, ensemble nature were vague: "We just had to guess about what you do in rehearsals to put those pieces together."

What evolved, he continues, was a "21st-century rehearsal room. We set up constant access to the internet, to DVDs and CDs. We could go online and find out what, for example, Geoff Hoon had said at a particular time, then print it out and get the actors to look at it." All told, a wide range of people ("upwards of 50") with an informed perspective on the conflict - including BBC foreign correspondent David Loyn - were consulted, contributing a drip-feed of inspiration.

Working closely alongside them in Glasgow were Scottish composer Davey Anderson, the youngest of the core group at 26, and movement expert Steven Hoggett, 34, of physical theatre company Frantic Assembly (already back in London rehearsing a new play from Mark Ravenhill). "Every day the answer to the question 'How can we tell the story?' would change," Anderson muses, pulling something between a grin and a grimace. His pounding reworkings of traditional regimental songs, taking their cue from what he saw, would in turn help generate new sequences.

In order to ensure that no visual detail could be faulted, Hoggett and the actors underwent punishing training sessions at the hands of a former regimental sergeant-major. At the same time as toughening up the cast, the challenge was to find a non-naturalistic means to express their subjects' fears and feelings. Sometimes the process was agonisingly slow. The evocation of a suicide car-bomb attack went through 20 different versions to arrive at a due sense of gravity and gravitas. At other times, as with the poignant "letters from home" section, the men silently performing indecipherable, ritualistic gestures, the end-result was fashioned in a single session.

Working right up to the wire, none of them felt able to declare whether they had achieved what they wanted. "We were too close to it," Burke says. It wasn't until the

final preview, when the audience rose to their feet to applaud, that Tiffany allowed himself a sigh of satisfaction.

For Burke, the approbation of the ex-soldiers, who perforce have had to remain anonymous, has mattered more than the other accolades. Besides the bonds forged during drinking sessions, his personal connection with the Army runs deep - a great uncle was in the Black Watch, a grandfather was in the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry, a territorial battalion of the regiment; he grew up with the Army in Gibraltar. "We felt a huge responsibility to them. This was never intended to be a huge political piece or to make a big statement. It was about giving the boys a voice."

Tiffany adds: "One of the men who'd helped us came up afterwards. It had been hard for him to watch because three of his pals died. He was pretty shaken up. He said, 'I didn't think anybody cared about us.' If nothing else, I think we've shown them that people do care. That's good enough for me."

- At Edinburgh Drill Hall (0131 228 1404), until Sun, returns only