



Quentin Letts

Edinburgh review

BLACK WATCH
by Gregory Burke
University of Edinburgh Drill Hall

ONE of the more avoidable military blunders committed by 'tartan' Tony Blair was to scrap the Black Watch in the recent regimental mergers.

Centuries of fighting pride were discarded. You'd have thought a Labour Cabinet with so many Scots would have known better.

The National Theatre of Scotland has been quick to grasp the magnitude of Blair's decision.

In a magnificently theatrical polemic, one which combines raw army language with dance and music, it depicts Black Watch soldiers on their last tour in Iraq.

We see a unit of eight lads become bored. We see them squabble. We see them sweat and swear and struggle to keep their self-control - and we see them in the heat of choreographed battle, complete with a startling array of bangs and booms.

No Iraqis appear. We meet the unit's shrewd sergeant and its honourable commanding officer. Oh, and there are brief appearances by a couple of revolting politicians (Messrs Geoff Hoon and Alex Salmond).

Otherwise it's just the men with their desert fatigues and their deep, rough comradeship.

For once, superlatives are no exaggeration. This is a stunning show. John Tiffany's direction in the warehouse-style space of a drill hall makes it feel at times like a deadly version of a military tattoo.

Playwright Gregory Burke has no

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time for sugary distractions or cheap hits. He cracks on with the task in hand, Black Watch style.

Only at the end does he allow the commanding officer to let rip, with a denunciation of the damage done in the last three years to a British military reputation which was three centuries in the making.

You emerge, after an hour and three quarters of this astonishing show, with your political dander twanging, your outrage tweaked.

Civilians will not only gain insights into the demands we idly make of our armed forces.

They will also experience a rising fury at the rashness of so much that our Government has done in Iraq and the way the Prime Minister and the recently-retired Chief of Defence Staff collaborated in the obliteration of Scotland's terrifying regiment of red-plumed warriors.

