

British Theatre Guide

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Black Watch

Gregory Burke

National Theatre of Scotland

Barbican Theatre

20 June–26 July 2008

When Gregory Burke conceived and wrote the text of *Black Watch*, he might have been inhabited by the shade of William Shakespeare. Such is the quality of this work that it truly deserves comparison with the Bard and must be a better bet than almost any other play of recent times for the immortality of performance centuries from now.

Black Watch certainly deals with timeless issues. It looks at the futility of war in close up and counterpoints camaraderie and the Golden Thread of loyalty to a regiment with the reality of high spirited lads behaving badly while always aware that in the background lies the constant threat of an instant death.

There is far more to the re-cast National Theatre of Scotland transfer, which has taken two years to get from the [Edinburgh Fringe](#) to the Barbican, than the story. Director John Tiffany perfectly balances the glorious three hundred year history of the Gallant Forty-Two or Red Hackles with the human side of fighting but also the political undercurrents that leave trained soldiers acting providing peacekeeping targets for suicide bombers at the same time as their regiment is voted out of existence.

Tiffany achieves this with straight acting, movement and dance from Steven Hoggett, music both rousing and moving courtesy of Davey Anderson and a tremendous, fearful soundscape designed by Gareth Fry; all within a traverse design by Laura Hopkins, enhanced by video footage, in which pool tables can become armoured wagons and the quick change is turned into an art form.

Between them, they convey the boredom, glory and terror of war in only two hours. It is hard to believe that any other theatrical production has taken its audience so close to the experience of the heat of battle and the men who are at its sharp end. Burke also has the good sense to inject humour on a regular basis, lightening a mood that could otherwise become burdensome.

The early scenes show a bunch of former soldiers telling their story to a journalist played by Michael Nardini. They are led by the excellent Paul Rattray as Cammy, a natural for the job of leader. He is as close to an intellectual as you are likely to get in the ranks and has the *Black Watch* in his blood, as does the public school-educated officer, Jack Fortune.

Cammy calms his colleagues when their high jinks get out of hand but also speaks a great deal of sense. He narrates their story and, in one amazing scene, that of the regiment at the rate of around a century a minute.

The regiment itself is disbanded as these men are risking their lives. This barbarity takes place for reasons of political expediency. Remarkably, such is their loyalty to the Gallant Forty Two that the men find this almost as heart-breaking as the deaths of colleagues.

The actors are as well-drilled as the soldiers whom they portray, each showing great talent in ensuring that their character is a believable individual with foibles that distinguish them both at work and play.

This unique multimedia experience has as much content as many a long novel, making many telling points about global and also personal issues. By the end, which is unbearably moving, the audience is stunned but after a decent pause erupts with appreciation.

They have been through a sublime experience, which demonstrates why live performance at its best is a medium that no other can match.

Go and see *Black Watch* if you can. It might well affect your life or at the very least, your perception of the War on Terror and those who are waging it on your behalf.

David Chadderton [reviewed](#) this production on tour in Salford. It was also [reviewed](#) by Lynn Rusk at the Dublin Theatre Festival.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)