

## THEATER REVIEW | 'BLACK WATCH'

### PLAY BOMBARDS SENSES AS MEDIA MESH ONSTAGE

Including production in Virginia Arts Festival was a brave booking

By Mal Vincent The Virginian-Pilot

Even if you are repulsed or angered by it, there is no question that the National Theatre of Scotland's production of "Black Watch" is the local stage event of the season.

Its novel use of multimedia – from bombs exploding around the audience to bagpipe music and video images – stretches the boundaries of what theater can do to involve and challenge the senses as well as the brain.

"Black Watch" defies expectation. Because it depicts the everyday life of a Scottish Army regiment in Iraq, you might well expect it to be an anti-war diatribe that resemble the sparse theatrical works by American playwrights. You would be wrong.

While the work questions the action and motives of politicians, it is more concerned with the camaraderie and pride of the men themselves.

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Watch vets some four years ago in a pub in Fife, Scotland, the play is about friendship, fellowship and, perhaps most of all, what its author Gregory Burke calls an "appeal to the male psyche's yearning for a strong identity."

Performed by an athletic corps of 10 men, the work honors the heritage of its titular regiment, an outfit that dates to 1739. It runs about an hour and 50 minutes.

Seemingly pro-war moments early in the play are surprising to us, almost as if we were seeing a John Wayne film from World War II. One of the soldiers says, in no uncertain terms, that "I want you to (expletive) know I wanted to be in the army."

Disillusionment follows. There is an urging that "the government knows what it's gotten us into." They curse and they brag about what will take place when they get home and are proclaimed "war heroes." They joke that they are fighting for "porn and petrol," not necessarily in that order, as their officers warn them that the Muslims will be offended by the naked women posted on their locker walls.

They refer to the Americans as their "comrades" and watch from a distance the grand show of U.S. soldiers bombing a village for four hours with the result that two civilians are killed.

"Black Watch" is being seen in the United States only in New York, Los Angeles and Norfolk. Its booking as the final piece in the 12th annual Virginia Arts Festival was a brave act by event organizers and the kind of thing that will put the festival on the national and international map. But it is not without a notable financial risk. Although backed by the Scottish government and the British Council (the latter of which hosted a lavish opening night party), there is a real question as to whether this work will attract mainstream audience in the United States.

The play denounces every cliché of wartime dramas, at its own peril. Traditional war depictions follow a tried-and-tested formula. They introduce the squad to us and force us to know its members. Then suspense builds as to who will live and who will die. That's not the way "Black Watch" handles it. This is an ensemble drama both in the playing and the writing. We know little about the individual men, other than that most of them come from mining families. There are no Iraqi characters. There is no gore, until the final scene when three corpses dangle above the stage.

The language is strong. If you try to count the number of times the F-word is used, you'll have a tough time keeping up. That lets out the family audiences. There is also the threat that the dreaded I-word, Iraq, will scare off audiences. It has certainly done just that at the movies. A number of critically praised films, particularly last year's "In the Valley of Elah," have not done well at box offices.

The play's main selling point has been its staging. A long, narrow stage, something like the length of a football field, runs between two banks of facing theater seats. The cast races from one end to the other. While this is different and spectacular, at times it's a little like watching a tennis match.

Stylized theatrical concepts, though, both attract and distract as the evening attempts not only to capture Iraq but the 266-year history of the Black Watch's warrior trek. This is done via a rather bizarre fashion show in which Paul Rattray in the role of Cammy is dressed and undressed numerous times as he models the uniforms of the Watch through the centuries.

Perhaps deserving the highest accolade is sound creator Gideon Turner.

The play is concluded by a curiously motivated show of choreography in which the men fight among themselves. Whether the intent is to depict the futile nature of war or to display the athleticism of the actors, it drives the audience into a state of similar exhaustion.

The actors in the ensemble are effective in proving that spectacle need not have a cast of thousands. If forced to name a standout, it would be Michael Nardone, who has dual roles as a tough military leader and the writer who interviews the men.

I can't say that "Black Watch" is either powerful or heartwrenching in the expected terms of typical war drama. It is, though, a unique example of how theater can be used to challenge and even threaten an audience. Although we are kept at a distance as onlookers, we are quite amazed by what we see.





COURTESY PHOTO Sound, video and lighting – including strobes – intermingle as the stories of a Scottish Army regiment in the Iraq war are told.



mal This production depicts the everyday life of a Scottish Army regiment, but not in a predictable, formulaic way.

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