

BLACK WATCH
By Gregory Burke
Virginia Arts Festival
Prism Theatre at Scope
May 24 through June 1, 2008
For tickets call: (757) 671-8100

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

I've been counting the days until BLACK WATCH by Gregory Burke opened. This brilliant work, of theatre at its finest, has received virtually unprecedented rave reviews in America and around the world. Finally opening night came. I was stunned.

In a disastrous attempt to replicate the original, long rectangular acting space, with the audience seated on each side, somebody came up with something called the Prism Theatre and installed it in Scope Arena. There's one rather major problem. You can't see the actors because the slope of the risers isn't steep enough. If you are fortunate enough to be seated on the first three or four rows, your vision may be acceptable. On row "G" to the side where my wife and I were seated, you could see heads and shoulders when the actors were standing; heads only when they were sitting; and, nothing when they were on the ground. The latter position is not uncommon in war plays. The only full views of the performers occur when they are on the gigantic scaffolding at each end of the rectangle. Quite frankly, it's a rip off, and an inexcusable affront to this very important play.

That said, please understand that this explosive drama is down there in all its glory. It's just that over half of the audience can't see or hear it.. What I'm reporting to you is what I saw in glimpses, now and then, and from what I have read about BLACK WATCH. First, the cast is a superb ensemble of good actors. They are not John Wayne type soldiers but really foul mouthed, at times funny, professional grunts. They make painfully clear that they don't object to going to war and fighting but they do object to going to war and NOT fighting. They never mention his name but they do conclude that Mr. Bush's war is about petrol and porn.

There are echoes of Bertholt Brecht in John Tiffany's superb direction. With his assistant Steven Hoggett providing highly original choreographed movement, the story unfolds in a series of flashbacks as the surviving members of a squad of Black Watch soldiers recall their time in Iraq for a journalist in a pub. The directors weave these events together in fascinating somewhat surreal scenes with segues using music, song, a little dance, film, scarily realistic sound by Gareth Fry and richly theatrical lighting by Colin Greenfell.

The background to this story involves three Black Watch soldiers who were killed in 2004. Their battalion was sent to the "triangle of death" in Babil to free up American forces for their assault on Fallujah. The proximity of this battle to the upcoming second term Bush election did not go unnoticed by the British commentators. The Black Watch is no more. It has been merged into a single Royal Scottish Regiment. It's almost 300 year history is told in a masterful piece of choreography. A soldier is born aloft by his comrades, twisted and turned, dressed and undressed in the various uniforms worn by the Black Watch from Waterloo to Iraq. He narrates the history while all this is going on. At the end of the play, he affirms once again that he fought for his regiment, not any government or country, but for the Black Watch and his mates.

In a program note, Professor Nicholas J. Cull points out that this "regimental spirit" in playwright Burke's hands has been embezzled and misdirected to serve the ends of the imperial state. In other words what, who, and why we are fighting has been lost or hidden under disingenuous verbiage. Petrol and porn is as good a reason as any.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.