

Tristan Bates Theatre

Review by Graham Kirby

It is over six years since we invaded Iraq – it seems longer - but with an almost daily death toll coming from Afghanistan and a current troop deployment under way by President Obama, it is a timely revival of one of the successes from last year's Edinburgh fringe festival, Motherland, the retelling of accounts of family's stories, collected by writer Steve Gilroy from women across the North East of England.

After the fallout from [Handwritinggate](#) , it is clear that there is a lot of confusion about the roles that the military is or should be playing in the modern world. And leaving aside the rights and wrongs of any “liberating” army, whether or not troops are properly equipped, it is clear that political leaders – whatever the state of their handwriting or communication skills – are finding it near impossible to explain the changing role of the services and persuade. A golden thread the runs through many of Motherland's stories – so evocatively and beautifully told by Rachel Adamson, Charlie Binns, Eleanor Clarke and Helen Embleton – is that their loved ones died for “no purpose”.

We speak of “our boys” (in spite of the fact that women serve in the military) and “our heroes”, but there is a dichotomy between the images we see – and the images that families cherish – and intent: it is not uncommon to see a newspaper picture of a uniformed soldier proudly sporting his rifle. But to paraphrase one of the mothers questions: how many people has that

killed, what destruction has that caused. Memories of childhood, first dates and Christmases past cannot take that away. How can these two contrasting images – or people - exist side by side? These heroes are also killers – and they want to be – but that side is just not often seen. What is it that drives them into the military, the play asks. Is it just resolve and the need for adrenalin?

When the First World War started, troops went off many thinking they would be home by Christmas. Instead – those that survived – found themselves bogged down in one of the most horrific conflicts to have cursed the continent. But in spite of the awfulness of what happened in the trenches, jingoism did not die and a land fit for heroes was promised. During the early eighties Private Eye magazine was able to spoof a Sun headline with “KILL AN ARGIE AND WIN A METRO” because it accurately reflected its macho tempo. These days, twenty five years on – different times, different wars - we speak of war crimes, but aren't all wars crimes?

Banner headlines of the death in Baghdad or Basra were not uncommon three or four years ago. Now Iraq has faded from the headlines and is once again just a far away country of which we know little. Afghanistan, once forgotten and long neglected, has come to the forefront. Despite that, this production is important now in showing that death is not just a number. But it is not just the topicality of this piece which makes it worth seeing; it is that through the raw emotion and the wealth of experience, we are taken away from the certainty in which parts of the media have claustrophobically enveloped us, and are allowed freedom to doubt.