

By Elayne Jude, Great North News Services

Forever smiling, fixed at the age of eighteen, Cheryl James' portrait beams at us spotlight on the wall of her parents' Llangollen living-room, as Nicholas Blake QC announces to the press from the marble halls of Canary Wharf that his 2007 review of the deaths of four young recruits at Deepcut Barracks will not recommend a public inquiry.

On the 'balance of probabilities', and against the current of alternative evidence, three of the deaths are pronounced likely to have been self-inflicted. No suspicion of foul play is established in the case of the fourth.

Philip Ralph's documentary drama, 'Deep Cut', opened 10th March 2009 at London's Tricycle Theatre. Commissioned by Sherman Cymru theatre company and performed in Wales and at the 2008 Edinburgh Festival, the work was constructed over three years from firsthand testimony from the families, fellow recruits, journalists and an independent forensic investigator, and from a mass of public documents, including Blake's review.

The writer claims never to have asked a leading question. "The family of one of the recruits and their journey from parents to campaigners are at the centre of the piece and form its narrative drive, but I see this as a straightforward redress of the balance given to the story by the news media which always favours government statements over those of campaigners...theatre has two key functions; to tell stories and to ask questions".

The burden of the telling of the Jameses' story falls on the character of Des James, played here (by Ciaran McIntyre) with such plain passion, stoicism and commitment that I was three quarters of the way into the production (an exemplary 1 hour 10 minutes) before it had quite registered that I was hearing the account told by an actor, and not Cheryl's father himself.

The role of Doreen, Cheryl's mother (Rhian Morgan), is rather more thankless. There is an extraordinary account of an Army and a police officer turning up on her doorstep to inform the Jameses of Cheryl's death, but refusing to deliver the news until Des has been separately informed. Doreen stands shadowed behind her man, an often invisible woman, caught between nervous bubblyness and practised self-effacement, tipping sometimes into hysteria. It's hard to bring off. There is an inverse relationship between the degree of pain and disturbance in the material and the requirement that the actor should emote in those tones. Anger, it is said, is a sword the actor picks up at his peril. So, too, grief this raw.

Cheryl James' fellow recruit, Jo 'Jonesey' (Rhian Blythe) is a little cannonball of energy and irrepressibility, ending in simple sober adult reflection. The Army shouldn't be easy, she says. It has its history and traditions to live up to. Blake's review found 'clear evidence of foul abuse of trainees'. Jonesey describes the toughness of the regime, the process of breaking down acolytes

to rebuild them (not unlike drama school). She loved it. She thrived on it. "The Army made me," she says. "But it killed Cheryl."

The set (designed by Igor Vasilijev) is a domestic interior just this side of surreal, marooned cenrestage within the margins of the big world, crowded with elements of kitchen, bathroom, lounge. A tinsel tree perches on a fridge. The tiled bathroom wall becomes a slate for slogans: JOURNALISM DROPPED THE BALL. There is a door into the hinterland of the house, into which Doreen is constantly disappearing.

The actors step nimbly enough around the overstuffed furnishings, but look hemmed in. The effect is of smallscale lives whose natural boundaries are burst by the demands of this Sisyphean-seeming task of bringing to book the Titan machinery of the State, while hammered by their ongoing tragedy. For loss of this desolating magnitude is not an isolated event, but the start of a permanent reverberating continuum.

This tragedy has generated a blizzard of bureaucracy, its verbiage stowed away overhead in file boxes and brought down again through caravanstyle hatches in the ceiling, releasing a blizzard of paper which the characters must navigate.

Cheryl's portrait is taken down from the wall and placed on the simple scaffolding of a floor lamp, front of stage, by a stand of plastic flowers. The portraits of the three others who died - Sean Benton, 20; James Collinson, 17; Geoff Gray, 17 - join her. The freestanding angular frame, with its allweather blooms below, resembles one of those ubiquitous improvised roadside shrines, public, provisional yet strangely enduring, rocked indifferently by passing traffic, greying under the tepidly curious glances of half-interested strangers.

The press conference for Nicholas Blake's review was held in the chilly caverns of Canary Wharf. The families' opportunity to respond with their own conference was contingent upon their getting back to Westminster with the journos in attendance. But by then the press has got its story. The Blake review is a vast document. Digesting and analysing its contents takes time. But the media demands its story now. Followup rarely gets onto the front page.

In January 2008, the permanent closure of Deepcut Barracks was announced, the site to be razed, eradicating forever the possibility of further autopsy.

On Des and Doreen's living-room wall the spotlight shines on, a halo around an empty place.

'Deep Cut' runs at the Tricycle Theatre, Kilburn, till March 4.

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