WAR MUSIC

Poetry turned performance – National Theatre Wales are currently presenting a performed version of Christopher's Logue's extraordinary account of Homer's Iliad, designed and directed by Mike Pearson and Mike Brookes. [Link]

Pasts and presents mingled in place event,
past poetic shards rearticulated as real-time event –
theatre/archaeology.

It's another theatrical triumph – after Aeschylus Persians 2010 [Link] and, with Royal Shakespeare Company, Coriolan/us 2012 [Link]

Here is Andrew Dickson in The Guardian [Link]

Homer's epic is the theatrical event of the year

5 / 5 stars *The Ffwrnes, Llanelli*

The audience becomes the raw material of this vital National Theatre Wales version of one of our oldest narratives.

An army straggles along the beach in improvised encampments; they have been here nine long years. Inside the walls, the city waits. The noose of history tightens; this battle can only end one way.

After taking the oldest playtext in the western canon, Aeschylus's The Persians, up to a firing range in the Brecons (2010) and offering a rewired Coriolanus inside an aircraft hanger (2012), for their latest journey theatremakers Mike Pearson and Mike Brookes begin where so much of it began, with Homer's epic. Staged in four roughly two-hour chunks, this National Theatre Wales production does not attempt the full span of 24 books, but – employing the five slender volumes of translations-cum-adaptations on which poet Christopher Logue toiled for over 40 years – offers a distilled version of one of the oldest narratives in existence. Achilles broods, the Greek and Trojan armies spar, then hunker down; Patroclus meets his maker. The gods,

callous and cold-eyed, supervise everything.

We enter an evacuated space, illuminated by sallow industrial light: piles of tyres, stacks of white plastic garden chairs, microphones hanging from the ceiling. Screens flicker, some with autocues, on others the gods’ faces materialise; on one wall, there’s a cinema-sized projection of a brooding Welsh landscape, moving with surveillance-camera-like slowness. In the centre, eyeballing us as if we are about to be interrogated, are 10 actors dressed in identical black suits-cum-uniforms.

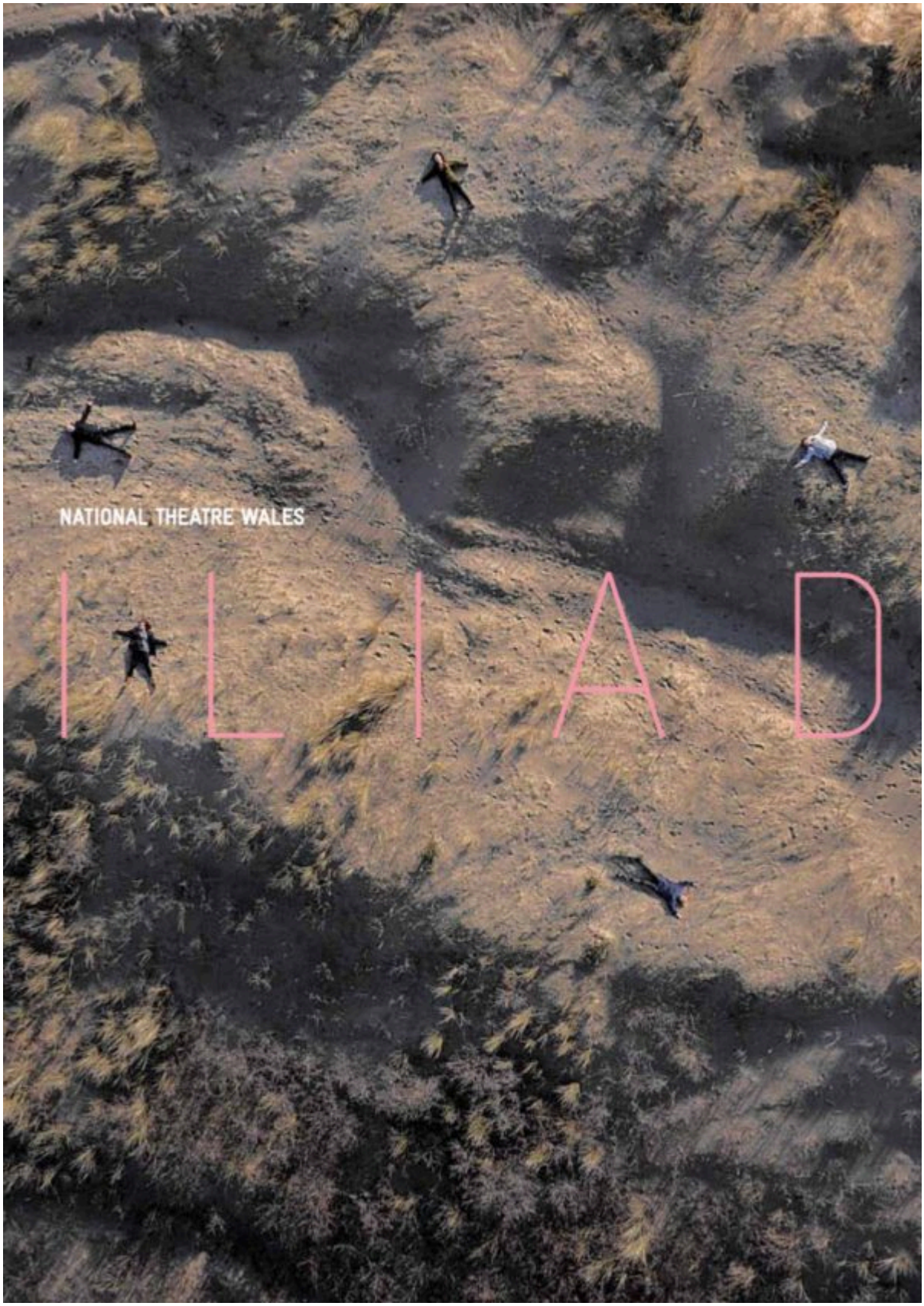
Six performers will speak in the end; the other four are deployed as army-style grunts – creating improvised stages from the tyres and slabs of MDF, erecting structures that resemble palisades or siege engines, then tearing them down again. In one astonishing moment, they mass the chairs menacingly into the centre of the room. The rasping of the legs along the floor is uncannily like the roar of hornets. Elsewhere, we in the audience are the raw material: mute observers, complicit witnesses, or invited to lie down with limbs twisted and splayed like battlefield dead. At the centre of everything is Logue’s text, recited by the

actors and advancing relentlessly across the autocues. The language – sometimes calling to mind JH Prynne, elsewhere the militaristic fascinations of Ian Hamilton Finlay – is both seductive and barbarous: “Fierce chrome. Weapon grade chrome / Trembling above the slopes …”; an arrow wound that makes “a tunnel the width of a lipstick”.

Logue’s metallic blank verse could almost have been designed for performance – his versions have been staged before – but this is challenging stuff, and Pearson and Brookes make few concessions to ease (and don’t always catch Logue’s sly wit). The gestures are minimal, and as the actors flicker between different characters it’s not always easy to track who’s speaking, or to whom. Sometimes your attention wanders; then you’re politely turfed out of your seat so it can temporarily be repurposed as part of the set.

But so much here leaves you breathless. We are invited to hover above whole armies, then swoop in for a microscopic close-up as the grieving Achilles grinds his face into the dirt; shown moments of iridescent beauty and pitiless, hair-raising horror. This theatremaking is steely and severe, but it is also

bracingly alive. Iliad is certainly the theatrical event of the year. It may be the theatrical event of the decade.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