

KOKODA – THE PLAY

(A review by Louise Pascale)

When we commemorate ANZAC Day and the soldiers who survived the Kokoda Track there's a story we rarely talk about. It's the story of homeland militia who were sent there to defend Australia from the Japanese. Called the chocolate soldiers they got the nickname as they were deemed cowards who would melt in battle. The militia was made up of men who chose not to volunteer for Churchill's war. Seen as weak they were men who were unemployed, disenfranchised or have just chosen to fight at home rather than abroad.

When the Japanese began their invasion the homeland militia were sent to Papua New Guinea. They were sent there on the promise of getting a 'holiday in the tropics'. What they found was far from a holiday. Even before battle began men were dying of malaria and other tropical diseases.

With no adequate training, no understanding of jungle warfare and complete ignorance of local conditions these soldiers were at the mercy of leaders more concerned about themselves than them.

Kokoda is a one man play told by 20 year old Whyalla actor Jayden Marshall. Jayden holds the stage for the full 70 minutes as Private Morris Powell who is also 20 years old. Private Powell is from Melbourne and he signed up as an unemployed, street smart yet impressionable young man. He joined with his mates the Zorro gang and these faceless characters are key to deciphering a new narrative around mateship we rarely hear when we talk about the ANZACs.

Marshall being the same age as the lead character really brings home how young these men were when they undertook this life changing experience. This experience is about death, the fear of your own mortality and the fear of watching your mates die around you.

In Kokoda, like all ANZAC legends it is your mates that hold you together, meanwhile deep down they also tear you apart. Private Powell watches as his mates turn in to war machines and killers and it shocks him. But then the killing becomes harder.

When the Japanese retreated they did not take their wounded with them. They left them behind for Australian soldiers for mercy kills. This was one of the more confronting scenes of the play.

This with the jungle warfare of mud, mosquitos, trekking and walking you can easily see Kokoda as a psychological challenge for these soldiers.

To talk about the death and psychological impact on soldiers seems taboo in our celebration of the ANZAC legend. That is why this play feels bold in that it tells the story of Kokoda we seem to avoid. The story is detailed but not too graphic. It does have impact and you know that this 20 year old man has been changed forever.

We know it today as PTSD but at the time it was undiagnosed and unspoken. As the program says "...when they returned, never wished or were able to speak of their experiences and the horrors they witnessed and / or endured."

The script of Kokoda gives a lot of weight to the experience on the ground but how it impacts on this young man for the rest of his life is left with the audience to imagine. Knowing what we know today you can easily derive the long term impact. However we are left to make that judgement on our own and it left me wanting to feel more for Private Powell.

Kokoda walks a fine line between a history lesson of the Papua New Guinea campaign and the psychological impact of war. Both are very important however with the incorporation of archival footage and detailed story telling this reviewer wanted to feel more rather than walk away with an alternative history lesson.

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A Review by Carly Fisher

In 1942, Australians fought the Japanese on the Kokoda track, in one of toughest military campaigns of the war, which claimed the lives of over 600 men and left another 1000 severely injured or ill from tropical diseases. *Kokoda*, written and directed by Peter Maddern, focuses on the story of one of the 600 – one man who proudly fought the Japanese in the name of his beloved Australia.

Private Morris Powell – a young inexperienced fighter called on to be soldier when the fighting of 1942 escalates and further battalions of Australian men are called on to serve. We meet Powell after his landing in New Guinea, his youthful optimism clear and his mates surrounding him. It would be fair to say that by the time we encounter Powell, he has determined the harshness of the landscape but remains unaware of the brutalities of battle – he is barely trained – ‘a chocolate soldier’ rather than defense force – considered capable of wearing a uniform but little else and yet called on to fight the Japanese who, at the time of landing, over powered them 10 to 1. We watch Powell as he develops from this point through to battle and witness his hopeful idealism be shaded by the loss of friends, the psychological impacts of war and the terrors of Kokoda.

Throughout the production, an intense and clever soundscape plays. This has been co-designed by Andres Diez Bianco and Josh Williams, with assistance from Jarrod Windham. We are given no break from the buzzing of the mosquitoes, the sounds of planes overhead or the general noises of war; they are constant through the one-act one-man show. The set is simple but effectively so – two boxes covered in netting and a black drape cloth up back that also serves as a projector screen in which images and videos from the trail are intermittently played. The lighting, designed by Zac Eichner, gives insight into the depths of the jungle, the darkness of the times but also the

brightness of the track. The production elements work swiftly and collaboratively to give a great mystique and authenticity to Maddern's script.

The script itself is a credit to Maddern who has obviously spent a great deal of time researching the details of the track and ensuring authenticity is achieved. The play is one that should be seen by all Australians – particularly young Aussies who may not have even heard of the Kokoda track and the sacrifice these young boys made. I commend Maddern for taking on this challenging battle in just a one man show, allowing for the emotion of sacrifice to play to the forefront as we are not overwhelmed with numbers, but with detail of one man's journey. This is clever writing that utilizes slang and jargon appropriately to create the world of a young, ill-equipped man sent to war in the 1940s.

Unfortunately, in a well executed production, the solo actor, Jayden Marshall, lets the show down. He is difficult to understand and offers little variety in his performance – there is no building intensity or moments of strength and weakness and as such, the performance feels monotonal. Whilst his youth served the production well, more experience is required from the young actor prior to taking on a one-man performance – the solo play is a hard art form to master and as an audience, we can see him treading in the deep end throughout.

As an overall production, Kokoda is very impressive, the script is strong and the show makes great use of the small theatre it is in, and I urge more people to take the opportunity to see this important piece of history come to life.