



Fringe Review: *The Unknown Soldier*

BY [TRISH FRANCIS](#) ON FEBRUARY 20, 2018 [ADELAIDE FRINGE](#), [FRINGE REVIEWS](#)

Presented by **Grist to The Mill Productions**

Reviewed 19th February 2018

Last year I produced a one man monologue about a lesser known piece of World War I history and I know first hand the challenge for the actor, the importance of the writing and how essential it is to get the audience to buy into the piece with little prior knowledge of the events, little physicality, few props and a heavy reliance on just the spoken word. I was curious to see how writer/performer Ross Ericson tackled **The Unknown Soldier** with all of the same challenges. He rose to them admirably.

Jack is a member of the military brigade that stayed on in France and Belgium for several years after the Armistice to recover bodies and body parts, identify them if possible, and give them honourable burial or reburial. It is an element of war we have seen little about, perhaps because of the added horror it heaps on a public already struggling to comprehend the trauma of the Great War.

Ericson's piece is a perfect balance of sensitivity, humour and realism and he takes the audience on an emotional rollercoaster as he chats to his mate Tom and explains in his casual Devon drawl the difficulties of the task he has been assigned *"The worst ones were those that had been lying in a water-filled shell hole. Big bloated things they was, and they'd come apart on you when you tried to lift them up, just like wet paper"*.

The words are tempered by the mundane activities Jack attends to as he speaks: removing his puttees and army boots, rolling cigarettes in preparation for the next day in No Man's Land and pouring himself a rough French wine in an enamel army issue mug. It takes a couple of seconds for the image of what he is describing to register, the contrast to the casual tone and activities having greater impact than if he'd have screamed and cried throughout. But there was time enough for that as Jack succumbs to the nightmares about his time in action, shooting the Germans as they move in on the trenches and ultimately fighting them off with the bayonet. As he flails around the stage, trapped in his memories we gain a full sense of the toll his experiences have taken on him.

The central theme of **The Unknown Soldier** is that the authorities want to take the body of an unidentified soldier back to Britain, to be entombed in Westminster Abbey as a symbol of the heroism and honour. As part of his duties Jack is assigned with the task and although he struggles with the politics of it, uses his role in the mission to honour a promise to his mate Tom. Along the way there are many poignant moments such as striking up a conversation with the one of the German military also clearing No Man's Land, "we would have been friends, if someone hadn't told us we couldn't" and much needed relief from the gruesome reality in moments of humour.

This piece is well written, entertaining, informative and expertly acted. My only minor criticism is that even as someone who was brought up in the UK, some of the dialect makes it difficult to catch everything that is said. Nevertheless, the performance was superb and I'll be sure to read the script (available on Amazon) to fill in any gaps.

Reviewed by **Trish Francis – Glam Adelaide**

Rating out of 4.5 : 5