

Drama about a miners' strike is timely offering

REVIEW: Serjeant Musgrave's Dance, Theatre Royal, Workington

IT'S uncanny how often new plays in Workington find an echo in current events – and the trend is maintained with John Arden's classic *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, which opened a five-night run at the Theatre Royal on Tuesday.

The death of Baroness Thatcher this week revived memories of the bitterness of the miners' strike of 1984 to 1985 and here, in a barren northern town of a century earlier, there's a colliers' strike under way as four soldiers arrive with two very large and very significant wooden crates among their baggage.

Arden's men bearing arms may wear scarlet tunics rather than body armour and combat fatigues, and they may use a 19th century Gatling machine gun rather than an anti-tank missile launcher, but the play demonstrates very succinctly that ordinary soldiers (the four main men are



THIN RED LINE: The soldierly cast for *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* at The Theatre Royal, Workington

Picture: Paul Adams

all 'other ranks' and not of officers) are people first and fighting men second with hearts, minds and foibles that are as free and malleable as in any human.

The NCO of the group, the Bible-reading *Serjeant Musgrave*, gives scope for a quite magnificent performance from James Sheppard. The three privates are also played with verve by Andy Hughes, Ben Brincombe and by newcomer Bob Hallard.

I won't give the game

away by revealing what drives these men, or why they are glad to find themselves in a mining town which has been cut off by winter storms.

But they certainly didn't arrive to attempt to break the strike. The action is lively, gritty, sometimes bawdy and sometimes violent and demonstrates where the route to destruction can lie when poisoned politics and ambitions are allowed to rule.

The large cast, under the

direction of Paul Adams, provides a mesmerising showcase of the theatrical talents within West Cumbria, including brothers Ryan and Daniel O'Hagan.

There's good work from Gareth Douglas-Brown as the bumbling bargee, from Stuart Evans as the mercenary mayor, from Luke Norendal as the crooked constable and from Thom Robb as the parsimonious parson.

There are convincing coal miners, particularly fighting Tony McGee and bolshie Marc Baillie, and both Francesca Smith as the savvy pub owner and Allix Atherton as her buxom barmaid give good measure.

Listen too for the unaccompanied singing voices of Allix Atherton, Marc Baillie, Bob Hallard, and Andy Hughes. Wonderful atmospheric stuff.

The Workington Playgoers production, sponsored by Fellside Recordings, is a treat – for a third of the ticket price you'd pay for a professional production.

The production runs until tomorrow. For tickets, call 01900 602122.

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