



LEFT: Official war artist Allan Harding MacKay, left, pictured with fellow performers Denise Clarke and Michael Green, decided to write the play in the aftermath of the murder of teenager Shidane Arone. Picture: Sean Dennis

A NATION'S TORTURE

One man's reaction to a Somalian's death at the hands of the Canadian army makes for shocking theatre, writes *Mark Brown*

Ask most people for their thoughts on the Canadian military and chances are you will be told that Canada's army is very different from the forces of its superpower neighbour the US. That is to say that it tends not to be engaged in war, preferring to put itself at the disposal of humanitarian or peacekeeping efforts. That was the feeling of many, if not most, Canadians until March 1993. It was in that month that the Canadian people learned of a shocking atrocity committed by their soldiers in Somalia.

Troops of the Canadian Airborne Regiment tortured and murdered a 16-year-old Somali, Shidane Arone, within the army compound. One soldier, Kyle Brown, even took "trophy photographs" during and after the attack.

One of the first people to become aware of the crime was Allan Harding MacKay, the official war artist, who arrived at the army base just hours after the atrocity had been committed. He witnessed the immediate aftermath of the appalling event and it brought itself to bear upon his

paintings, his video work and, most recently, a major stage play, *Somalia Yellow*, with acclaimed Canadian theatre company One Yellow Rabbit.

Meeting me at Glasgow's Tron theatre ahead of tonight's opening, the calm, artist talks of his experiences with almost dispassionate clarity. He explains that the murder of Arone "happened about 18 hours before I arrived in the camp. There were other media people there, and we were being briefed about the theatre of operations. An ambulance pulled up in the compound in front of a holding cell. About eight guys piled in with a stretcher, came out with a body on it, put them in the ambulance and took off. There was no explanation given to us at this point of what this was about."

Although the authorities tried to keep MacKay and his colleagues in the dark, questions were being asked by the more persistent journalists among them. Even before he arrived back in Canada from his short visit to Somalia (he was given just six days to observe events), the artist had already discovered the dreadful truth.

"On the way back from Somalia there was a stopover at Prestwick," he remembers. "There, one of the photojournalists told me that he'd talked to a lot of the troops on his own and had started to piece this story together. He had found out that there had been a torture and a killing in the camp."

The story soon broke in the Canadian national press. "It was a trauma for a lot of Canadians," he says. "We had our own sense of the role of the Canadian military, which was delivering humanitarian efforts. Then, all of a sudden, we realised that within this particular group, there were a lot of bad apples." It was, he believes, "the shattering of a myth about the impeccability of Canadian soldiers".

The question for MacKay, as an artist, was how to respond to the event. Although a witness to the immediate aftermath of the murder, he had not seen the act take place. Did he consider it his duty to attempt to imagine and depict the death of the young Somali?

"The images I had were not about the killing and the torture," he insists. "I was there in the aftermath. What I did have was an image of the holding cell, which became a sort of witness to the event, so I could use it as an emblem of the horrific deeds. Kyle Brown had actually photographed the torture, so all of that horrific imagery is not part of my work."

The murder of the teenager was not the first military tragedy that MacKay had first-hand experience. "My brother was killed in Korea aged 17," he says. "So there were some histories that connected, although I wasn't conscious of it till later."

However, his early bereavement could not be said to have given him a particularly strong sense of resentment against the Canadian army. He insists that the play is not putting across any particular political position. Rather, "it's a description and dramatisation through poetic fiction and factual documentary. It gives a sense of an individual's experience of being a witness and observer, as artists are, to events." The rest is up to us as an audience, he says.

What is certain is that audiences will have the rawest possible experience of MacKay's own testimony, as he performs in *Somalia Yellow* himself. "I'm not an actor, and the accommodation that has been made is to just let me be myself," he says. "I have a script in front of me at all times, so I have confidence and don't have to stumble along. I can tell my story and be very visible as an actor on stage, but also a real actor in this event. It's a sensitive way of putting me forward, yet making me feel comfortable in that context."

● *Somalia Yellow* is at the Tron, Glasgow, tonight until Saturday. Mark Brown will be part of the panel for a discussion following tomorrow's performance.

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Picture: Sean Dennie

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