HOW TO KILL

THIS impressive piece by Speakeasy Theatre Company at Bristol's Tobacco Factory is based on a poem, featured in the programme and used throughout. In fact, the whole thing had the feeling of a long, dramatic poem, so elegantly organised was the writing, blending seamlessly with the extracts.

Unfolding as an account from the Second World War, the piece became a sojourn through the Dante's Inferno of a battlefield, which was made bearable by the wit, the beauty of the descriptive passages, and the sardonic parody of upper class soldiering, the analogy with a child's war game being illustrated by the use of toy tanks and guns.

The staging, with its simple means and innovative – I have never seen oil drums used so creatively!

Direction, by Alan Caig, and Angus Reid, was good, with light and loud used in just quiet moments, nicely balanced. The one-man performance by Angus Reid, excellent. A gem!

Stella Goorney

HOW TO KILL

Richard Demarco Gallery

AS THE memories of the Second World War get the anniversary treatment, a show like this reminds one not of the victorious survivors but of the casualties and of the horrors. Written and then performed by Angus Reid it records the war career of Keith Douglas, a poet who died days before the end of combat – as the killing was about to start and victims buried.

He believed in being "absolutely British". He detested the desk-job he was allocated at the beginning of the war. Then in the 8th Army he met the desert and death. He was part of the "unshod horses", the tank regiment, that he also refers to as the "mechanised cavalry".

Here is the simple triumph of Reid's script. Poems are interspersed with excerpts from Douglas's biography *Remember Me When I'm Dead*. On a set that is simply lit but complicated by miniature tanks and enormous tin drums he catches both the claustrophobia of the tank's interior and the paradoxical beauty of the "starlit sand blanket" of the desert sky. And he captures the harsh impersonal noises of it all.

Because I do not like militarism does not mean I do not admire bravery. This aspect of Douglas's life, and its effect on his writing is brilliantly conveyed by this actor in his hour-long tribute to the articulate, and unfortunately dead writer who wrote of "death, like a familiar."

Hayden Murphy

THE SCOTSMAN Saturday, 4 November, 1989

A scene from HOW TO KILL

FESTIVAL REVIEW

The List 1 – 14 September 1989

Desert War not so sporty after all

THE WAR in the Western Desert between Rommel's Afrika Corps and Montgomery's 8th Army has acquired the reputation of being the "last sporting war", a latter-day tournament in which knights in (more or less grimy) armour tilted at each other.

There were no buildings in the way, and very few civilians who might get hurt. It was a "clean" contest between the "forces" of two matched armies from distant lands. But this compelling solo show, *How to Kill*, Angus Reid exposes the actual horror of it and the fears that no amount of boyish bravado could overcome.

Deploying columns of toy tanks on the stage, and sitting astride a couple of oil drums, he plays a young subaltern riding into battle with the mechanised cavalry who became known as the Desert Rats.

Brilliantly he captures the paradox of a carefree spirit of adventure going hand in hand with death and destruction.

Taking his inspiration from Keith Douglas who fought and died in the Second World War, Reid dramatically delivers Douglas's magnificent poetry.

There are times, at the beginning and end in particular, when Reid becomes too deliberately elegiac in tone, but the staging and movement by Alan Craig and the imaginative force of the whole concept certainly justify the Fringe *First* award it received from *The Scotsman* earlier this year.

It is being performed tonight and tomorrow at the Traverse, Edinburgh, and next week at the Tramway Theatre, Glasgow – all proceeds going to the Earl Haig Fund which will also benefit from the sale of posters available at the Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh on the morning of Remembrance Sunday.

THE INDEPENDENT
Wednesday 30 August 1989

REVIEWS

HOW TO KILL

A irfix tanks, a sandpit, a chap in khaki making tank noises, this has the whiff of a cheapskate war drama about it, but it is an inventive and unsilly account of the war experiences of the poet, Keith Douglas. A refreshing change it is too from staged blogs of Sassoon, Owen et al. The thrills, the horror and the carnage are described in terms of cricketing metaphors (enemy panzers are "off-spin bowlers") producing an atmosphere grimly comic, hot and dusty. Leaping about, being blown up, petrified or sick, Angus Reid smuggles a little verse and a portrait in miniature into this vivid and personal despatch from the desert front line. ***Robert Gore-Langton***

Richard Demarco Gallery (venue 22) 17-21 Blackfriars St (031-557-0707) 1pm to 2 Sept.

HOW TO KILL • Battersea Arts Centre

Time Out

LONDON'S WEEKLY GUIDE FEBRUARY 6-13 1991 No.1068 £1.20

Written and presented by Angus Reid, staged by Alan Craig.

■ In a Lilliput-ill sandpit, surrounded by fifty tanks, 500 model aeroplanes and an assortment of battle debris, WWII poet Keith Douglas plans all solutions – first as a child in Surrey, then as a soldier in the Western Desert, and finally as a ghost. Angus Reid tells the fifty of (his) lives in order to become "one". Douglas learns that humanity's ability to kill on a mass scale exceeds the imagination's emotional capacity to handle the responsibility. Inspired by Douglas's poetry, this one-man play disentangles his life from the mechanised slaughter of the battlefield. Reid's use of Alan Craig's choreography and design, using Plan 9's gadgets and oil drums for a tank, desk, pavilion and percussion, are brilliant, and demonstrate the ingenuity of theatre at its most economical. The conclusion of "our turns" is the God waiting to be impact, this is an unsettling example of the alchemy alcatic theatre can attain. (Richard Demarco)

THE GOOD TIMES GUIDE

THEATRE

How to Kill

Battersea Arts Centre

THE sand crunches under our feet. Warplanes are suspended in mid flight. Model tanks litter the landscape. Oil drums are decently furnished.

With unswerving topicality the Edinburgh-based Speakeasy Theatre Company has come south with a solo performance inspired by the wartime poet Keith Douglas. The majority of his work describes the desert war in the time of El Alamein. Ironically he was killed by a sniper in Normandy, as a much less alert brigadier, while in his twenties.

His poems form the core of the show being written and performed by Angus Reid. For a deep-pocketed enthusiast, Mr Reid has the deceptively philistine look of the wartime subaltern, of pre-war gilded youth. He declaims from Keith's own collections to the languid drawl of the officer class, puts wonderful tanks improvised from oil drums, bazooka spirals, and vomits at the sight of a dead tank crew.

The humour is unexaggerated and debunking. Instead, from the military ironically verging on boredom when the young recruit identifies his "trade or calling" as sport. His romantic eagerness to join "cavalry of the line" leads him to its modern equivalent, the tanks of the Sherwood Yeomanry.

As first confined to "pushing a pen across a desk", Douglas makes a bold lie it and joins his regiment at the front. Reid dizzyingly portrays the non-hysteria of tank warfare to a surreal estimate of boredom and heavy corrections from the officers who insist on the "correct procedure" from a commander dazed from a direct hit. The man has developed his tank.

Frankly, a military machine that draws its costumes from cricket and riding strikes me as preferable to a culture to whom titles like "Operation Teutonic Sword" would mean. Here the actor's sense of mockery is perfectly honed.

Luckily the words remain in this account of the most deadly "gift designed to kill": man himself. The sorcery that makes a man of dust of a man of flesh is charted with fantastically spare economy and enacted with passion.

MARTIN HOYLE

'How To Kill'

Battersea Arts

The black walls of Battersea's studio are festooned with shining silver planes; its sand-strewn floor is patterned with toy plastic tanks, behind two huge oil drums Speakeasy Theatre's bedevilled, gaunt young man who regales us with his experiences on the desert battle field. Had I ran not read the programme, you might easily presume that this one-man show was a poet's report from the Gulf, a theatrical correspondent rendering his own riveting account of desert combat.

In fact Angus Reid's compelling, hour long show which won a prize first at last year's Edinburgh Festival, is a homage to the poet Keith Douglas, who in 1942 disobeyed orders and drove his tank straight to the El Alamein battlefront. He died in 1944. Douglas was determined to experience the frontline at first hand while his commanding officers evaded the horror of war by communicating with each other in an idiom peculiarly English; mixing cricket with horse racing in a way which is almost poignant.

Such is the exacting physical immediacy of Reid's performance and the acuity of his observation – of a dead soldier in a tank, he says "He lay in such an orgasm of pain, that I thought he must be alive" – that the Battersea run could not be more timely. In a performance of transforming intensity, Reid magnificently conveys the ambivalence at the heart of this poet who deplored war and its human toll, but found the heart of battle exhilarating.

Alex McKeown

THE SCOTSMAN

THE ARTS

GLASGOW HERALD THURSDAY NOVEMBER 9 1989

Tramway, Glasgow
MARY BRENNAN

Tour de force to a tiny audience

How to Kill

HOW TO Kill is a dramatic act of remembrance, a one-man show – written and performed by Angus Reid – which brings together, poignantly, the brave energy and tragic waste entailed in war. Based on the experiences and poems of Keith Douglas who was a tank division during the North African campaign, the piece catches with convincing intensity the harrowing moments during the Battle of El Alamein when, for the young poet, the whole adventure went irrevocably sour. Not that he was meant to be anywhere near the battle front: "... he was, in fact, consigned to painting a pen with a brush, this but in a burst of romantic derring do, he stole a truck and ran off to join in the carnage.

Reid fills the character at this point with the kind of engagingly boyish enthusiasm that draws its notions of war from cricket and books – and we know, of course, that the realities ahead will crush such naivety as surely as the enemy's shells will crush the tanks and skulls of his comrades.

Douglas's journey into the valley of death is given a coherent and persuasive physicality, both through Reid's deeply committed, deeply felt performance and through the imaginative staging devised by Alan Craig. Across a simple scatter of sand, small, black plastic models of tanks are deployed by Reid, as if the whole process of combat was mere child's play. A simple, but devastatingly effective, image. He, himself, straddles an oil drum and makes us believe it to be a mere tank, mimicking the engine noise with his own tongue, his equally convincing mannerisms and body language.

Through him we glimpse the crowing relief of surviving an offensive only to feel the adrenalin ebb away before the wretched remains of friends who had, moments previously, been tossing the lingo of cricket matches across the intercom — jolly gungho fun, until fatally caught out. Douglas himself was caught out in 1944 but his poems live on, not least through Reid's performance which is sympathetic without being condescendingly sentimental: a reminder not just of the waste that is war but of the strengths that are live theatre.

HOW TO KILL

SPEAKEASY COMPANY

BATTERSEA ARTS CENTRE, LONDON

SINCE gaining *The Scotsman* premier Fringe prize in 1989 and a laudatory review from Allen Wright, Angus Reid's *How to Kill* has been staged in Glasgow and at various centres in Poland. Travelling lightly, it requires only sand, miniature tanks, oil cans, a few tapes and an agile, very physical virtuoso performance from its solo protagonist, as Mr Reid's unquestionably is.

His Speakeasy Company has arrived at London's Battersea Arts Centre. There it has been rewarded with a paltry handful of critiques and general indifference. There were but 11 of us in the audience the other night, that, be it said, when the pains and penalties of desert warfare once more loom large.

Inspired by the wartime experiences of Keith Douglas, poet, temporary soldier and participant in the El Alamein campaign, *How to Kill* is a collage powerful and atmospheric, of his verse and prose, a triumph of sympathetic association. Through his choice of texts plus some linking material, the multi-talented Angus Reid evokes Keith Douglas's enduring capacity to subsume the particular into the general, the waste and pity of war. It works at every level, the elevated, the risque and the down-to-earthy.

As a professional *tour de force* for instance, Reid's one-man description of a tank-battle could hardly be betterced. It is all there, the noise, the confusion, the horror and the black humour, counterpointed with the sporting lingo favoured by the cavalry in those days. Even though, for a moment, is Douglas's poetic vision eroded by sharply observed actuality.

Not least among the merits of this remarkable short play is Angus Reid's almost eerie ability to re-create so surely the mind, the aspirations and even the physical presence of a front-line subaltern of 50 years ago.

Christopher Grier

FIVE new plays received Fringe First awards from *The Scotsman* yesterday, bringing this year's total to 28. This is the highest number given in any year since the awards were introduced in 1973 and reflects the exceptional standard of new work on the Fringe this year. John Fraser, who has been portraying J N Barrie at the Festival, presented the awards to representatives of the plays at the Fringe Club and he is pictured with them and the deputy administrator of the Fringe Society, Tricia Embden.

The awards went to Cragrats for £5, 6B performed at Gracemount Leisure Centre; The National Student Theatre Company, for a new translation by Gwynne Edwards of *When Five Years Pass* by Federico Garcia Lorca at the Festival Club; Clyde Unity Theatre for *Beyond the Rainbow* by John Binnie at the Crown Theatre; Angus Reid for *How to Kill* which he is performing at the Demarco Gallery; and Actual Strathclyde Theatre Group for *Waiter at Life* by Chris Ballance at the Gilded Balloon Theatre.

THE STAGE AND TELEVISION TODAY, Thursday, 26 August, 1989

HOW TO KILL

Standing tall, like Gulliver in Lilliput, in a sandy landscape of miniature tanks and aeroplanes, Angus Reid's performance is as vigorous and dynamic as this status confers. Adapted from the life and work of Keith Douglas, Second World War poet, the script concentrates on Douglas' experience fighting in the North African desert, on a single tank attack, charting his progress from naivety to bitter experience. In doing so the tortured metaphysical imagery of Douglas' poetry of war and death is skilfully blended with sharply comic satire of British Army uniformity.

Artistically speaking, the Second World War stands defined by the woeful paucity of the Anglo-American blockbuster – this play effects the beginning of its demise. In the highly physical textures of Bruce Reid's installation of oil drums, Angus Reid buries the romance of the War in the deafening battering of steel. (Andrew Palmer)

■ How To Kill (Fringe) Speakeasy, Demarco Gallery (Venue 22), 557 0707, until 2 Sept. 1pm. £3.50 (£2.50)