

MARKING TIME

Marianka Swain applauds new West End musical *From Here to Eternity's* ambition, but was disappointed by its sluggish plotting

The iconic image of Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr embracing in the surf was dazzlingly risqué for a 1953 cinema audience, but the love affair between the rugged sergeant and the boss's wife was actually one of the tamer aspects of James Jones's explosive tome about the stark reality of army life at Pearl Harbor.

Lyricist Tim Rice, composer Stuart Brayson and book writer Bill Oakes returned to the original, uncensored 900-page novel when creating their adaptation, reinstating excised material such as overt references to prostitution and a gay subculture storyline, but the unfortunate result is a show that feels both overstuffed and underwhelming. Numerous plot strands compete for attention and, in a rushed climax, several are left dangling.

Oakes can't decide which elements to foreground, nor does he figure out how to drive the narrative forward when his dual protagonists are defined by inaction – a neat metaphor for the futility of war, but frustrating when the theme of stasis robs this lengthy show of its dramatic momentum.

This problem is echoed in the pleasant but disparate numbers, ranging from swing and blues to ballad and Hawaiian folk, which tend to reflect on the action rather than moving the characters in a new direction. The exception is the bitterly ironic "I Love the Army", breaking point for serial bullying victim Private Angelo Maggio. Dynamic Ryan Sampson makes him the heart of the show, and whenever he's not on stage, his absence is sorely felt.

As First Sergeant Warden, Darius

Campbell has a sonorous baritone, but limited emotional range and no raw machismo, while Robert Lonsdale lacks the charisma necessary to soften the edges of Robert E Lee Prewitt, the mulishly obstinate Kentucky miner's boy who often values principles above people. Both struggle with accents – Lonsdale's travels from coast to coast in the space of a line.

The women fare better, despite limited material. Siubhan Harrison's working girl blends pragmatism

with tender yearning, while Rebecca Thornhill passionately conveys a life of quiet desperation.

The show's saving grace is the combination of Tamara Harvey's slick direction and Javier De Frutos's sensational testosterone-fuelled choreography. There is real purpose to the movement, imbuing training drills with tangible feeling, defining and developing character, and setting scenes efficiently and innovatively. The transitions are seamless, the formation work powerful, and the welcome burst of high-stakes action at the end memorably visceral.

Perhaps musical theatre just isn't the right medium for capturing the brutal disillusionment of Jones's novel – too often, the grittier and more meditative aspects are undercut by generalised sentiment. However, it's a welcome break from the recent spate of inane jukebox musicals, and De Frutos makes a convincing case for dance as a narrative tool with surprising depth. ●



Darius Campbell (First Sergeant Warden) and Rebecca Thornhill (Karen Holmes) in *From Here to Eternity*