Reactions to a revival of his once-banned, anti-war classic have been unsettling, writes Alan Seymour

THE first time someone said it, I felt two reactions simultaneously: surprise and a kind of moral shock. The second time, I mumbled feebly that all of us associated with the production would rather have the play performed in no such context, thanks. For these commentators had been saying what amazing timing it was that The One Day of the Year -- which contains one character's criticism of knee-jerk patriotism and sentimentality about war -- should get such a major new Sydney Theatre Company production just as war broke out in Iraq. Was the implication that the company had been fiendishly clever in programming it (almost a year before!) -- or that, to our unbounded joy, such a war could provide a great stimulus to the box-office? Yuk. The stark reality of the modesty of our enterprise, compared to the monstrous scale and significance of modern technological war, curbed any unlikely tendency to hubris on our part. But does my once-banned play, written in 1959, have any relevance now? The young protagonist Hughie's small, personal rebellion is the product of years of pent-up resentment against his father's unquestioning faith in the rightness of past wars our country has fought -- and the unexamined expectation that the son should accept and carry on the father's values. 2/19/2019 EBSCOhost http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/delivery?sid=6a4fdccbb-3577-49f9-ad3a2e20dde%40sesmgr06&vid=4&ReturnUrl=http%3a%2f%2f... 2/3 Well, Hughie would be out there demonstrating today, so perhaps his character does somewhat chime with the feeling -- of millions around the world -- that the present conflict is a trumped-up kind of war, its instigators having unadmitted and less-than-noble scenarios beyond the unseating of a savage tyrant. It is not simply the matter of oil. The ultimate aim of the US -- or at least its Texan Republicans -- seems to be what they can now achieve politically, socially and economically (no pesky commo Ruskies around to induce restraint) as sole world policeman. Columnists the world over have been saying more brutally critical things than Hughie did about that determined triumvirate, which many think of as the coalition of the willingly coerced. Artists and entertainers are mere mosquitoes getting in an occasional bite at the flesh of the world's overweening giants. Saddam Hussein is a giant who, among other monstrosities, has treated in the most heinous manner his country's Kurdish minority. But the greatest giant in history is the US. Because we are culturally akin, it's easy to blind ourselves to the possibility that a nation which believes itself the greatest of all democracies has the kind of economic and military power that the dictatorships of the early 20th century only dreamed of; it seems often ready to use that power unilaterally and irresponsibly to a
point which makes it, as a perpetrator of violence, morally no better than the worst we have seen or can imagine. The old saws often still have relevance: It is wonderful to have a giant’s strength but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant. The most a play can do is offer an alternative view to the official one. Not long after this one was written, it was chosen as the Adelaide Arts Festival’s first Australian play. But this scandalous choice was banned by the executive committee. (Two of its senior members were ex-army officers.) Despite dire warnings, feisty producer Jean Marshall defiantly put the play into rehearsal with the highly respected Adelaide Theatre Group. Police attended the opening night as there had been a bomb threat. In 1961, the play had its first professional production in Sydney. (Another bomb threat.) Within a year, it was published and has since gone through more than 50 editions and has played around most of this country. For about four decades, it has been a set text in many Australian schools. I wasn’t sure I was happy, given its frisky beginnings, about that rapid absorption into the mainstream. But that, as they say, is show business. One Day of the Year opens at Sydney’s Wharf Theatre next Wednesday. Copyright 2003 / The Australian Source: Australian, The, MAR 28, 2003 Item: 200303286019601921