THEMES AND ISSUES

Inequality

Inequality is quite easy to identify in the play Black Diggers as the Indigenous characters are clearly treated differently to others, in most situations. Inequality was one of the reasons why the Indigenous men enlisted in the Australian Army in the first place, as they believed that if they fought for the country their own treatment would have to improve at the conclusion of the war.

In the majority of cases, the Indigenous soldiers were able to overcome the inequality they had experienced their entire lives, as soon as they put on the Australian Army uniform. Ern, Bob and Norm comment as such in the ninth scene, “1915. Queen Street.” There were still some instances of inequality while the Indigenous soldiers were serving, however they were not as common place as they had been before the war.

Once the soldiers returned home, however, the equality experienced during the war was quickly lost. Indigenous soldiers were not granted the same benefits as other returned servicemen, such as land benefits, and struggled to return to their old lives.

A desire for change

For many Indigenous men their main motivation for enlisting in the Australian Army was their desire for change. They strongly believed that by fighting for the new nation, Australia, they would be able to improve their position in society and gain fairer treatment for themselves and other Indigenous people. Their desire for change was so strong that they were willing to risk their lives to achieve it.

The Indigenous soldiers genuinely believed that their desire for change would be met at the conclusion of the war, but unfortunately their desire remained and often became a point of difference between them and those who didn’t serve. Archie, for example, continues to fight for fairer working conditions on the cattle station but those who he works with do not support his desire and would prefer he just did as he was told.

Once the soldiers returned home from war their desire for change only grew stronger: this was when they expected to see the benefits of the commitment they’d made to their country. However, their expectations were not met and this made life more challenging for them. For example, Tommy no longer fit in to society as he was expected to, but no one knew why that was. Instead of helping him, Tommy was left to his own devices, where he became an alcoholic and slept under a water tank.
Remembering

For any soldier, remembering their experiences of war is painful. In the cases of the Indigenous soldiers in the play some chose to remember, while others chose to forget, then there were those who had no choice but to remember.

Bertie couldn’t stop remembering and it ruined his life. Laurie chose not to remember and was able to get on with his life, but it was a clear choice he had made as he would rather life in “another world”. Ern tried not to remember but it only made things more difficult for him, he ended up having dreadful nightmares and it was only when he attended his first ANZAC Day march and caught up with some of the men he served with that he started to feel like his old self again.

For the Indigenous soldiers, remembering the war could often be more painful than it was for others, because it was a constant reminder that their sacrifices were all for nothing and that their lives were no different (and in some cases worse) than before they left.

Once you have experienced change you can never go back

This theme is an undercurrent throughout the entire play. For every character, once they have experienced change their lives are forever altered.

For the main characters, their involvement in the war had an everlasting impact on their lives – they were different people when they returned home. Experiencing the equality of being in the army made it very difficult for them to adapt to life back at home after the war. Archie, Nigel and Mick, for example, continue to fight for that equality and it has a lasting impact on the rest of their lives.

But also for the minor characters, even though they may not have enlisted and gone to war, their lives were affected by it and things were different afterwards. Bertie’s mum has lost her son and she will never know what happened during the war that causes it to happen, but she also has the guilt to live with of writing the letter lying about his age. The aggressive private, who tried to beat up Harry for eating with him on the ship, had his life changed when he was not supported by the other white soldiers. This change will have had an impact on the rest of his life.