

# Block party

Roger Waters rebuilds *The Wall* 30 years on and prepares to take it on tour. But what will it amount to in 2010? asks Jim Farber.

## Roger Waters Madison Square Garden, New York

"ARE THERE any paranoids in the theatre tonight?" asks Roger Waters from the Madison Square Garden stage.

It isn't quite the question you'd expect from a rock star to an arena full of beer-swilling baby boomers. But, then, it is posed during Waters' performance of *The Wall*, one of the least ingratiating, and most ironic, works ever to make the improbable leap to a beloved global touchstone.

Thirty years after Waters released *The Wall* with Pink Floyd — a band which never quite recovered from the album's fractious creation — its mad architect stages it once again with a new band and in a more elaborate and pointed way than ever. Waters aim is not only to invert *The Wall's* original meaning, but to out-dramatise a production already so big, it only managed to lumber into select cities way back when, bleeding money as it went.

The Wall 2010 turns out to be a far more efficient, open-minded, and potentially lucrative affair than the first time around. It includes no fewer than 56 North American dates, with nearly as many to come in Europe next year.

The pure scale of the thing gives it a hold on history. The Wall 2010 combines the most eye-widening visuals with the most enveloping sound of any show in memory. Some of the gruesome eye-candy on display fans already know — from the sky-scraper-scale, evil puppets seen in the original live show, to the fascist, often female-phobic, animation recycled from Alan Parker's solipsistic film version.

The actual wall isn't confined to the already sprawling arena stage but instead snakes menacingly up the sides of the venue to take up as much of your peripheral view as possible. As the pieces of the structure mount throughout the show's first half, the intended paranoia keeps increasing. You feel like you're being buried alive, while the musicians become likewise entombed. That's just one of many elements that make *The Wall*, at once, riveting and elusive, compelling and difficult.

So does the music. For a work that's almost universally loved by rock fans, it rarely ever well, rocks. Unlike other vaunted works in the Great Rock n' Roll Cannon, *Quadrophonia* or *Exile On Main St.* say, *The Wall* often drifts through surprisingly introverted and personal

ballads. Also, unlike its '70s rock contemporaries, it is never fun or even slightly sexy. That holds just as true in the new version, though Waters does smile, incongruously, several times during the show, and pumps a few fists in the air, making for an uncomfortable mix with the show's overall fascist motif.

Waters — who still possesses an imposing charisma at 67 — appears at the start in red armband and leather storm-trooper jacket. The band mirrors his dark hue, helping to keep focus attention on the stage set.

Regardless, their music speaks for itself, aided by dynamic 3D sonic effects. Sound plays hide-and-peek around the arena, adding to the sense of surveillance. The seven strong band inhabit the old Floyd with complete authority. Even the trickiest casting — the stand-ins for Dave Gilmour — click. Admittedly, it takes two players to fill his shoes: Dave Kilminster and Snowy White. But their walls nail both Gilmour's spacey fluidity and the psychedelic crescendos that give this often sodden work lift. (Gilmour himself is rumoured to show up at the

"Its sheer scale gives it a hold on history."

London concerts next May, reflecting the thaw in his long-chilly relationship with Waters).

Elsewhere, singer Robbie Wycheff ably mouths Gilmour's vocal parts, though he sounds more like John Wetton than his intended karaoke subject. Waters' own voice retains its lost-in-space quality. His scene spent singing Goodbye Cruel World, walled in by all but a lone brick, chills.

The most controversial aspect of the staging has involved the Anti-defamation League's protest at the use of dollar signs following Jewish stars of David during Good Bye Blue Sky. But Waters has since switched things around, putting the dollars before the Islamic crescent, a move that cures one problem only to cause another. Despite such gaffs, the visual message of *The Wall* has found a far broader and sharper focus than before — and a most welcome one.

Waters' original *Wall* could seem like one long moan from an over-privileged rock star sick of own his audience. (Why else wall himself off from us?) Here, it addresses something far larger and more urgent. Images of people in modern warfare appear on the bricks throughout the night. With war as its new target, the barriers now being addressed aren't between a star and the world but between us all. That, as much as the impassioned re-embrace of the music, has turned Waters' 'dour classic into something possessed of its own hope.

