



## Brighton Festival 2016

### Operation Black Antler

Hydrocracker & Blast Theory

FringeReview

**HIGHLY RECOMMENDED  
SHOW**

Genre: [Immersive](#), [Site-specific](#), [Theatre](#)

Venue: [Site Specific](#)

Festival: [Brighton Festival](#)

### Low Down

*Operation Black Antler is an immersive theatre piece by four-times BAFTA nominated artists' group Blast Theory and critically-acclaimed immersive theatre company Hydrocracker that invites you to enter the murky world of undercover surveillance and question the morality of state-sanctioned spying. For 40 years British police officers have been undercover inside protest groups. Scandals such as Wikileaks, the Snowden affair and the revelations about the Special Demonstration Squad show that secret forces within the state have little respect for law.*

*In Operation Black Antler you are given a new identity as part of a small team; you are briefed and then sent into an undercover operation. Once inside, you can choose to take part in a series of challenges that encourage you to consider what is and isn't acceptable in the name of security. From a first-hand perspective, you must make decisions and then reflect on the consequences of your decisions. What will you do when the power is in your hands?*

### Review

Hydrocracker and Blast Theory are companies known for pushing the limits of theatre, both in terms of form and what they ask of their audience. In previous shows of theirs I have found myself standing on a freezing cold Brighton Pier watching a fight while eating free fish and chips or have cycled around Edinburgh with a smartphone telling me what to do. Yet Operation Black Antler is definitely the most immersive play yet.

Warning: It is nigh on impossible to write this review without spoilers, so if you want to be surprised on the night, don't read on. If you are in two minds as to whether to go and are reading this review to find out. Stop reading and go! (Unless you are a very shy person who hates talking to strangers, in which case I would go and see something else!)

From the outset the play has a pleasing edginess – text messages sent the day before tell you where to meet, and once there, more instructions send you to a grimy shop front off the London Road. You are in character immediately – a no nonsense handler brusquely taking a roll call, filling you in on your mission, and helping you forge a false identity.

From there you are left to walk around the corner to the (real) local pub, which is full to the gunnels with people chatting and drinking the night away, some of whom are allegedly planning fascist activities, which it is our duty to investigate.

There is a big thrill to the experience you get as an audience member in this show. The companies have managed to create an atmosphere with enough uncertainty to think that you could really get yourself into trouble if you blew your cover. The cast are there to interact with you, but not necessarily to make your life easy, and of course you don't actually know who is the cast and who is the audience. I spent a great deal of time pressing a particularly nasty Donald Trump supporter for her views on LGBT issues, only to see her in the debriefing room at the end of the show, apparently having also thought that I was a cast member.

As well as the excitement of being placed right inside a theatrical performance, as an unrehearsed character, Operation Black Antler also forces you to question your own personal ethics, and how far you will go to acquire information.

Our handler told us that we may have to express views we are uncomfortable with in order to win the trust of our targets, and it was left up to us how far we took that. I certainly entered into my 'single mum with a chip on her shoulder about immigrants' character with an alarming level of gusto, and apparently on Saturday I am being contacted about being part of an anti-Islamization demo in Birmingham.

Now, of course I was playing a part, and knew that this was all make-believe, but the play certainly makes you think about how far you would be prepared to go as a member of the police force – because we were presented with some fairly compelling reasons as to why we might want to prevent these far right extremists from succeeding.

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I thought this play was thought provoking and a lot of fun, but then I am an extroverted wannabe actor who takes improv classes, so was unlikely to be phased by being asked to create a character and spend 45 minutes small talking subtly with strangers in order to extract incriminating information from them.

If however I was an audience member who had seen one of Hydrocracker or Blast Theory's previous 'immersive' shows, which were site specific and interactive, but where you could still be fairly passive, I might feel quite surprised and overwhelmed by the demands this play put upon me.

I am sure that the cast would be more proactive in talking to the clearly shy audience members, but it is easy to imagine someone used to more traditional theatre being taken to this show, and getting almost nothing from it, if they were unwilling to play along.

It is also slightly problematic to imagine, as a non-British or non-white audience member, how easy it would be to transform yourself into a character that would win the trust of a far-right extremist. I am sure the cast attempt to make no distinctions, but I would think it is an extra barrier to smooth participation for some audience members.

That being said, I thoroughly enjoyed the experience of this play, and wished that it could have lasted even longer, I think I got a bit too into my role! I would also love to go again and see how the atmosphere changes with different audience members and a different cast.

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## Show Website

<http://www.hydrocracker.co.uk/>