

Black Ops In Brighton

MAY
2016

Saturday 28TH

posted by [Morning Star in Arts](#)

TANUSHKA GILL participates in a disturbing simulation of police undercover activities

Operation Black Antler
Secret venues, Brighton
5/5

ON OPERATION Black Antler, you're not just immersed in a drama, you are the one who makes it happen.

Your experience is unique and, the more you participate, the more drama you get back.

Like me, you could sit within spitting distance of an unflinchingly truthful performer and experience the friendly face and soft tones of evil in a social setting.

A co-creation by interactive artists Blast Theory and site-specific theatre company Hydrocracker, the show invites unsuspecting audiences to enter the murky world of undercover surveillance and question the morality of state-sanctioned spying, not least the covert operations conducted by police inside protest groups.

The experience begins with a text telling us to meet outside a bank in Brighton's London Road. Suspicion, observation and the question of what is reality and what is drama are already in play even before anything has begun.

The next text tells me to check that everyone is there and then bring them to an empty shop, where we knock on the door. It's answered by a fearsome woman, who shoos us into the back yard. The kettle is on.

We're given our Person of Interest (PoI) to befriend at a gathering in a local pub where a band is playing.

Our back-stories are tested and rehearsed, my phone is on vibrate and we're sent to the pub.

We meet "Mickey" a friendly, unassuming guy. We need to find out why he was dismissed from his service in Iraq and when the next march of the "National Resistance" is happening. Mickey — no idiot — is hard work.

If we choose to talk about the weather he'd quite happily talk about the weather. Instead, impressively, it's the actor playing Mickey who makes us work, while being utterly responsive.

I use my Arab origin to come up with a back story: my family are Christians from Egypt who have fled persecution from the Muslim Brotherhood. I suggest they need more people like myself on their campaign to make it look less white. Bingo, I'm given the time place and date of the next "stunt" in Birmingham.

I'm often disappointed by "immersive" drama but this is a truly exciting theatrical experience, whose organisation is a hugely impressive operation. Most disturbingly, I believe my own back story and almost grow to like the extreme rightwingers I share a drink with.

Based on a recent book on the controversial police Special Demonstration Squad, the creators of Black Antler use the far-right group as a conduit to the issue of police surveillance and infiltration.

Cleverly, by focusing on the far-right, the experience makes it harder for a mostly liberal audience to make the call on what is necessary surveillance and what is violation of the right to peaceful political activism — all views on surveillance are suddenly tipped upside down over a friendly drink and a mellow bout of Islamophobia.

The genius of Black Antler is it doesn't tell us what to think.

As participants, we make our own minds up about what's going to happen and the piece is a profound and sobering example of how easy it is for us to change our views and become followers of, or informants to, the police.

Finishes today (May 28), box office: brightonfestival.org