

# Theatre review: Operation Black Antler (5 stars), by Anna Morell

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*Anna Morell reviews Operation Black Antler, an immersive theatre production, made with a cast of professionals and individuals from the local community, brought to Chatham from 23-25 June 2016 by [Ideas Test](#), [Blast Theory](#) and [Hydrocracker](#). The production explores the nature of undercover police work in contemporary Britain, focussing on targeting far right extremists, and takes place in secret locations only revealed to the audience on the night. There is a major catch for the audience – from the off, they are the undercover police.*

The text said to meet outside Argos. We stand there for ten minutes, just the right side of a rain shower. Other unknown people mooch over. We make eye contact and shyly greet each other. Slightly further along, a gang of adults and children boss each other about. Do we need to watch them? Are they watching us? And what about that gang of four boys coming towards us? My hackles are up, ready. I feel awkward. There is inward shuffling. And then, another text.

We head off to a secret location. Inside, a crackling, serious energy, and quiet, unknowable activity. Focus. We are here to infiltrate a right-wing extremist group. The tone is set quickly and firmly: this is serious. It matters. Do not muck this up. Get your stories straight: who you are, how you know each other, what you are doing. Get in, get out. You are undercover now.

And we really are. I am aware that suddenly, I have no real sense of self. I'm excited, slightly nervous, someone else. As we leave our brief and head to the bar where we are crashing a party, I'm aware that I've forgotten what it's in aid of. Is this a dangerous slip up already? It feels like it could be.

It's a bar I know. There are people I know in it. Are they part of this? Do they know that I'm not really me right now? What if they blow my cover? It's real, but I'm not real. I'm undercover. My plus one is undercover. Our cohorts are undercover with us. One is black and I feel protective already, knowing I mustn't compromise him with compassion, forgetting that this isn't even real. This is what it is to be in an immersive play. I am audience, actor, secret agent, chatty party-goer, head-screwed, unsure which version of me needs to take prominence, trying to work out which me I need to be to be safest.



The people we are infiltrating are possibly dangerous, and we know very little about them. Disbelief is utterly suspended. Despite everything they believe being diametrically opposed to what I believe in my real life, I find myself comfortably talking about what I don't believe in as if I do. I voted Leave in the EU Referendum. We have too many foreigners here. They're not the same as us really. I say these things with light, laughing eyes. I find myself flirting with a man touching my arm, not breaking eye contact. It feels real, and I am fine with it.

I use the loo at one point. It breaks the spell. When I come out, I am confused again. Not undercover, not me, an extra in some slackwater in 'Line of Duty'. It's like lucid dreaming, or a VR game.

I find my cohorts and snap back into undercover me, trying to find out more about how one POI (person of interest) is making his money. He's friendly, enthusiastic, and Muslim. It's not the expected narrative for a right wing extremist, and looking for nefarious means, I find myself thinking he could be people smuggling for cash, my real me mindset betraying my character's mindset, who has just been told by the POI that he thinks immigration is a big problem. I get his phone number, and feel smug that I have something that can be used against him. I try to say less to avoid betraying my tolerances, nodding in agreement with everything he is saying. Agreeing to what he is proposing to go deeper and find out more. It's all ok. Exciting, compulsive, necessary.

Another text. We are pulled out. Waiting in a car park for a handler to debrief us, I find myself desperate to go back to finish the job. To get more intel, be of more use, be my new undercover self. Along with my cohorts, I decide there is enough of a possibility of a serious threat to send in a deep swimmer – insider terminology for a deep cover officer. The handler takes our advice on board to make it happen.

It's only after that I realise that that adrenaline fuelled decision may have life changing repercussions for a man who may be innocent after all. Because of a hunch I have, he may find himself not swimming alongside a deep cover officer, but sinking, for the rest of his life.

It's a powerful, bewildering, unnerving experience, both during and for a considerable time after. I'm affected by what I have done, even though I know it is a fiction. And maybe worse, I know that I am willing to do what I have done again.

[Read our interview with Jem Wall, Co-Director of Operation Black Antler and Artistic Director of Hydrocracker.](#)

Photo: Anna Morell