

FRINGE REPORT

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Black Hands / Dead Section

Verdict: Springtime for Baader-Meinhof

London - MacOwan Theatre - March 05

21-24, 29-31 March 05. 19:30 (22:30)
MacOwan Theatre, Logan Place, W8 6QN
Box Office 020 8834 0500

LAMDA Baader-Meinhof.com

Black Hands / Dead Section is violent political drama about the Baader-Meinhof Gang. It runs for 3 hours in 2 acts with a 15 minute interval. There is a cast of 30 (18M, 12F).

The Baader-Meinhof Gang rose during West Germany's years of fashionable middle-class student anarchy (1968-77). Intellectuals supported their politics - the Palestinian cause, anti-US bases in Germany, anti-Vietnam War. Popularity dwindled as they moved to bank robbery, kidnap and extortion.

The play covers their rise and fall. It's based on a tight matrix of facts:

Demonstrating student Benno Ohnesorg is shot dead by police (Berlin 2 June, 1967). Andreas Baader and lover Gudrun Ensslin firebomb Frankfurt's Kaufhaus Schneider department store (1968). Ulrike Meinhof springs them from jail (1970). They form the Red Army Faction aka Baader-Meinhof Gang. Key members - Baader, Meinhof, Ensslin, Jan-Carl Raspe, Holger Meins - are jailed (1972). Meins dies by hunger strike (1974). The rest commit suicide: Meinhof (1976), Baader, Ensslin, Raspe (18 October 1977).

The play's own history sounds awful. Drama school LAMDA commissioned it as a piece of new writing (two words guaranteed to chill the blood) - for 30 graduating actors. The students contributed detailed research projects. It lasts for 3 hours. It sounds like hell.

No, it's a masterpiece. Built on a glorious script by remarkable playwright Van Badham, it zips along in a flurry of gunfire, corpses and rhetoric - with sharp flashes of wit. Performances are stunning. It's a West-End quality play with a cast made to take it there.

The play has two paces and two main emphases. The first half covers Baader-Meinhof's rise. It's action-packed and fast moving, like the opening of a high-impact piano concerto. The second act moves towards their decline - Dead Sections refers to the type of solitary confinement they experience at Stammheim prison. The pace is slower, with monologue speeches - rants at times - diminishing the dramatic tension. Then they're all dead.

The play ripples with tart observation. Rudi Dutschke remarks, on the shooting of student protester Benno Ohnesorg, 'Morally the shooting is an outrage; politically it's an opportunity'. A terrorist observes 'Sympathisers make terrorism possible'. There are some sparkling one-liners. Horst Mahler comments on the collapse of student protest in France: 'They moved from owning Paris to owning their own apartments'.

Satire erupts in a glorious scene where the prosperous middle-class terrorists visit the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) in Jordan. Horst Mahler arrives in matching beach-shorts and top. The women strip off their tops to sunbathe, offending their Arab hosts. There is no tolerance or understanding of the Arabs' customs or political plight (they're in the middle of a war). Andreas Baader is resentful towards them, and un-cooperative. The Germans' attitude has a subtext of the colonial - there's an unspoken tone of superiority.

This brief scene acts as a pivot, subtly undermining the integrity of the German activists. And it illustrates Van Badham's sharp eye for social observation.

At the end of tonight's performance, Van Badham is presented with Fringe Report Award 2005 - Best Playwright (for the plays Camarilla and Nikolina - [details](#)). In her speech, she says she wants to write a musical. This could be it. High on spectacle, Black Hands/Dead Section is tailor-made for the addition of some cracking songs. And they'd lighten the load of the politics in second half. Springtime for Baader-Meinhof.

The play has the benefit of a fine director **Fiona Buffini** able to handle deliver both spectacle and intimacy. There's graceful design from **Richard Bullwinkle**. The gifted individual members of a superb technical team underpin the success of the production.

There are strong performances from each of the highly-talented actors:

Tamzin Aitken presents Edelgard and lawyer Marielouise Becker with strength. **Nadia Albina** convinces as Irene Goergens, and Gudrun Ensslin's mother - it's a strong point of the play that it remembers the often-forgotten affected families of the gang's members. **Jonny Burr** is gifted as Thorwald Proll, Wolfgang Huber, and the lawyer Klaus Croissant. **Isabella Calthorpe** mesmerises as self-possessed, self-absorbed Gudrun Ensslin. **David Caves** makes hunger-striker and key gang-member Holger Meins a sympathetic character. **Barnett Cohen** is gifted as Dieter Kunzelmann and the deadpan Judge Foth.

Richard Crawley gives vulnerability to key player Benno Ohnesorg, and filmmaker Volker Schlöndorff. **Dougal Crowder** delivers lawyer Hans Heinz Heldmann, Palestinian weapons trainer Achmed, and a Judge with panache. **William De Coverly** gives a fine performance as key-member Jan-Carl Raspe. **Kate Donmall** is superb as the complex Ulrike Meinhof, capturing her ambiguity about drifting into terrorism, losing her children to her new career, and final disintegration. **Lisa Duffy** gives a fine performance as Genie, and a bemused Bank Manager. **Ambjorn Elder** delivers Gerhard Richter and other characters with grace.

William Ellis is impressive as Sohnlein and Brockmann. **Saskia Fischer** delivers Petra Schelm with conviction; her closing

performance as hostage widow Frau Schleyer is a tour de force. **James French** constantly delights as head-screwed-on-activist Bommi Baumann - a lively performance brimming with charisma. **Zannah Hodson** is graceful as Irmgard Möller. **Ben Hunter** puts in a stirring performance as Andreas Baader - catching the turns of his mood with conviction and creating a strong central character. **Erin Hunter** gives fine performances as Beate Sturm, and Margrit Schiller.

Victoria Kruger delights as the Minister of the Interior - it's a strong performance with just a trace of comedy that's exactly right for the part. **Conor Lane** delivers leading figure Rudi Dutschke, and a Judge, both with integrity. **Louis Lourens** is marvellous as the Rector - lacing the character with a trace of not-taking-it-too-seriously guaranteed to infuriate serious revolutionaries - and police chief Horst Herold. **Elise McCave** has the crucial role of one of Baader-Meinhof's most pivotal figures - Astrid Proll - which she delivers with élan. **Kathryn McMahon** presents Susanne Albrecht, and Monika Berberich with conviction. **Ole Martin Nilsen** gives a string of excellent performances, each carefully nuanced, as Karl, Cop, Commentator, Prosecutor, Prison Guard, and Court Attendant.

Simon Phillips is gifted as Thomas Weissbecker, and would-be assassin Joseph Bachmann. **James Powell** gives a fine performance as Frog. **Simon Stratton** is excellent as Klaus Rainer Röhl (Ulrike Meinhof's former husband); he's superb as Palestinian leader Abu Hassan - one of the play's cameo highlights - and the complex lawyer Otto Schily. **Ryan Stuart** plays Rainer Langhans and is excellent as kidnap victim Hanns-Martin Schleyer. **Ruth Wilson** gives a sublime performance as Ingrid Schubert. **Simon Yadoo** gives a memorable performance as lawyer Horst Mahler; a combination of wit, comedy, and wonderfully self-deluding gravitas; his Horst in matching beach suit in Palestine is a vision to treasure; a piece of acting that's full of wonder - superb.

The play works historical figures into tight drama. Those depicted in the play appear to include: (Baader-Meinhof Gang): **Gudrun Ensslin** (1940-77), **Jan-Carl Raspe** (1944-77), **Astrid Proll**, **Holger Meins**, **Horst Mahler** (see jewishpress.com - [The Strange Case of Horst Mahler](#) by William Grim, 13/5/04), **Thorwald Proll**, **Ingrid Schubert**, **Irene Goergens**, **Irmgard Möller**, **Karl-Heinz Ruhland**, **Monika Berberich**, **Beate Sturm**, **Peter Homann**, **Petra Schelm**, **Thomas Weissbecker**; (Socialist Patients Collective): **Margrit Schiller**, **Wolfgang Huber**; (Red Army Faction): **Susanne Albrecht**, **Volker Speitel**; (Movement 2 June): **Bommi Baumann**; (West Berlin Tupamaros): **Dieter Kunzelmann**, **Rainer Langhans**; (Lawyers): **Marielouise Becker**, **Klaus Croissant**, **Otto Schily**, **Hans**

Heinz Heldmann (see [Anarchist History - Kate Sharpley Library](#)); (Supporters): **Rudi Dutschke** (political activist, shot 1968, survived, died 1979); (Others): **Judge Foth** (see [Baader-Meinhof litigation](#)); **Benno Ohnesorg**; **Klaus Rainer Röhl** (Meinhof's husband); **Felix Vesper** (Ensslin's infant son); **Christine Ensslin** (Ensslin's mother); **Volker Schlöndorff** (filmmaker - 'The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum'); **Gerhard Richter** (painter - '18 October 1977'); **Georg Linke** (victim); **Hanns-Martin Schleyer** (kidnapped, murdered - see [see Hanns-Martin Schleyer case study](#)), **Frau Schleyer**; **Horst Söhnlein** (accomplice in department store arson); **Horst Herold** (police); **Joseph Bachmann** (shot Rudi Dutschke 1968). (Founders): **Andreas Baader** (1943-77), **Ulrike Meinhof** (1934-76).

Worthwhile? The play leaves that open. In the event, facts happened fast. Baader-Meinhof was eclipsed by the tearing down of the Wall, bankrupting of Russia, unification of Germany. And apathy. By 1983, the German government was able to prevent a mooted demonstration by threatening to cancel student railcards. Revolution? Not if we have to walk.

*** CREDITS ***

CAST: (alpha order): **Tamzin Aitken** - Edelgard, Marielouise Becker, Nurse. **Nadia Albina** - Irene, Frau Ensslin (Gudrun's mother). **Jonny Burr** - Thorwald, Dr Huber, Klaus Croissant, Journalist. **Isabella Calthorpe** - Gudrun. **David Caves** - Holger. **Barnett Cohen** - Dieter, Judge Foth, Security Guard. **Richard Crawley** - Benno, Volker, Kid, Landlord, Cop. **Dougal Crowder** - Hans Heinz Heldmann, Achmed, Judge. **William De Coverly** - Jan-Carl. **Kate Donmall** - Ulrike (Klaus's wife). **Lisa Duffy** - Genie, Bank Manager. **Ambjorn Elder** - Gerhard, Journalist, Interviewer, George. **William Ellis** - Sohnlein, Brockmann. **Saskia Fischer** - Petra, Holocaust Survivor, Frau Schleyer. **James French** - Bommi. **Zannah Hodson** - Irmgard. **Ben Hunter** - Andy. **Erin Hunter** - Beate, Margrit. **Victoria Kruger** - Minister of the Interior. **Conor Lane** - Rudi, Cop, Judge. **Louis Lourens** - Rector, Horst Herold. **Elise McCave** - Astrid (sister of Thorwald), Rector's Assistant. **Kathryn McMahon** - Susanne, Monika, Commentator. **Ole Martin Nilsen** - Karl, Cop, Commentator, Prosecutor, Prison Guard, Court Attendant. **Simon Phillips** - Tommy, Bachmann, Kid, Teacher, Prison Doctor. **James Powell** - Frog. **Simon Stratton** - Klaus (Ulrike's husband), Abu Hassan, Otto Schily. **Ryan Stuart** - Rainer, Hanns-Martin Schleyer, Security Guard. **Ruth Wilson** - Ingrid. **Simon Yadoo** - Horst.

COMPANY: Writer - **Van Badham**. Director - **Fiona Buffini**. Designer - **Richard Bullwinkle**. Assistant Director - **Jamie Harper**. Company Voice Work - **Yvonne Morley / Judith Philips**. Dialect Coach - **Tim Charrington**. Fight Director - **Jonathan Waller**. Make-Up Adviser - **Rosemarie Swinfield**. Front of House & Bar Manager - **David Duchin**. Production Manager - **Clio Nonis**. Stage Manager - **Catarina Almeida**. Deputy Stage Manager - **Rebecca James**. Assistant Stage Manager - **Jonathan Bristow**. Assistant Stage Manager - **Mark Edmondson**. Assistant Stage Manager - **Susana Pelayo**. Assistant Stage Manager - **Kathleen Powell**. Lighting Designer - **Sarah Bath**. Chief Electrician - **Catherine Clissold-Jones**. Deputy Electrician - **Daniel Read**. Lighting Crew - **Nicholas Bryan**. Lighting Crew - **Gemma Creamer**. Lighting Crew - **Martyn Derrick**. Lighting Crew - **Annie Kalinauckas**. Lighting Crew - **Kerry Lynch**. Production Carpenter - **Ben Carrick**. Production Crew - **Carla Archer**. Production Crew - **Nick Hayman-Joyce**. Production Crew - **Catherine Cooper**. Production Crew - **Stine Omland**. Production Crew - **Meg Spencer-Thomas**. Production Crew - **Joshua Tomalin**. Production Crew - **Charles Yarnold**. Sound Operator HOD - **Tshari King**. Sound Crew - **Sharyn Lappage**. Sound Crew - **Kate Myran**. Wardrobe Supervisor - **Sheena Heuston**. Wardrobe Deputy - **Allison Rubino**. Programme Design - **Society**. Print & Typset - **Consider This UK**. Website - <http://www.lamda.org.uk>. LAMDA: Assistant to the Principal - **Lin Cordoray**. Head of Drama School - **Rodney Cottier**. Head of Operations - **Philip Newton**. ACMA. Vice-Principal - **Colin Cook**. Principal - **Peter James FRSA**.

THANKS: Author's Thanks: Peter James, Colin Cook, Lin Cordoray, LAMDA staff, the actors, production designers and crew, Jamie Harper, Fiona Buffini. **Cast & Crew Thanks:** Tino Verducci, Royal Garden Hotel. Roger, Lockwood Audio. Tony Kelly, National Theatre Prop Store. Vision Express. Miryana Popovic & Tom Assheton, Tomtom Cigars. Sergei Cagalkine, Maximbond Cigars & Accessories. Tshari King. Laura Watson, Arts Ed. Rebecca James. Dave Elliot. Dan Synge for help building the set. Ian Ramshaw for painting the set. Muriel Smith, Zippo UK. Nick Paddy, Central School of Speech & Drama. Bryan Chakowa, Specsavers. Mark Edmondson. Sheelagh Macdonald & John Callow, Marx Memorial Library. UK Office Direct Ltd. Alex Cerci, Argos. Lee Brazill, Paperchase. Marcus Howsam, Trevor Howsam Ltd. **Dedication: Penny Hood.**

END

John Park

reviewed Tuesday 22 March 05 / MacOwan Theatre

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