

1984: PRESS RESPONSES

Headlong, UK tour (2013)

A new adaptation created and directed by Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan

www.roborticke.com

THE OBSERVER

Susannah Clapp

★★★★★

It is hugely ambitious to put this dystopia on stage. Hard to conjure up both personal threat and universal miasma. Harder still as the vision is expressed in phrases – Big Brother, doublethink, Thought Police – that are now mumbled over breakfast. Hardest yet when what was once an ultimate horror – Room 101 – is almost better known as the title of a chat show.

In adapting and directing 1984 – complete with the Room, though not with full-frontal rats – Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan have pulled off something tremendous. Their production for Headlong and Nottingham Playhouse, where the play was first seen last year, has elements both of horror story and of trance. Crucially, they base their version on George Orwell's appendix to his novel, in which the principles of Newspeak are discussed as if by a rather fusty lexicographer, and the viewpoint and timescale of the action are thrown into doubt. Winston Smith's story of love and protest against totalitarianism is framed by the meetings of a book club whose members are picking over his secret diary.

A less thoroughgoing re-creation would have gone in for updating and for much underlining of Orwellian prescience. Icke and Macmillan are infinitely more imaginative. Past and future, the actual and the virtual constantly collide. Episodes are repeated as if everything was on a loop. Chloe Lamford's set and costumes in part evoke the date of the novel's composition, along with drifts of 1940s music and bossy RP voices over the loudspeakers. There are knitted waistcoats, big lace-up girls' shoes, brown polished wood panels and a misty line of windows, through which characters gloom as on an early blurry telly. It's a world exploded to marvellous effect when Winston finds love, and to terrifying effect when all particularity is stripped from the stage in a featureless grey space. It's a world that has another dimension in Tim Reid's videos. Winston is constantly asking "Where am I?" but he might equally be asking "When am I?" or indeed "What am I?", flesh or fabrication? Chillingly, the moments when he and his lover think themselves most alone, and most real, are played out on screen.

As Winston, Mark Arends begins like a startled hare, quivering with eagerness, easily led into agreeing that he would throw sulphuric acid into the face of a child. He ends as a wretched scrap of flesh; in a torture scene that is hard to watch, his mouth and fingertips drip blood and his brain seems to leak energy. It's a vibrant performance which has an excellent counterpart in Tim Dutton. He plays the inquisitor antagonist with the authority and poise of a senior civil servant putting in to run the BBC. The audience becomes another layer in Orwell's circles of surveillance. It is one of the feats of this important play that you realise this complicity only later. Artistic director Rupert Goold is making the Almeida essential again.

THE TIMES

Dominic Maxwell

★★★★★

This stunning play is both a bold reinvention of George Orwell's great postwar novel and remarkably faithful to it. If that sounds like doublespeak, I suggest you experience what adapters and directors Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan have pulled off here — although, following rave reviews on tour, only day seats and returns are available for this London run. This great adaptation asks us to use our imaginations to decode its theatrical form just as Winston Smith has to decode the treacherous world around him. By doing that, it makes his struggle palpable and horribly plausible. It is Orwell's story, but not as we know it. It is doubleplusgood.

Taking their cue from the novel's appendix, The Principles of Newspeak, Icke and Macmillan present this account of Smith's fight against the Party as an historical document of disputed provenance. It starts and ends with people from the future discussing Nineteen Eighty-Four as if it might be a diary, might be Orwell's novel, might be propaganda. It's a witty, unsettling framing device that prioritises the idea that reality is mutable.

Chloe Lamford's design places the action downstage on a cramped 1940s office set. This stands in for flats, a canteen, the countryside, Winston's workplace at the Ministry of Truth. Scenes slam into each other. Winston and his lover Julia have to go off stage to find their love nest, the one room invisible to Big Brother. Yet we watch this old-fashioned room through video footage displayed on the wall-to-wall screen above the set. We are implicit in the erosion between the public and the personal.

So though the look and sounds of this 1984 have a strong look of 1948 (when it was written), the story links with unsettling ease to the internet age. "The people are not going to revolt," says Smith's Room 101 interrogator, flanked by men in white biohazard suits. "They will not look up from their screens long enough to notice what's really happening."

The cast of nine keeps this fluid and unsentimental. Mark Arends's Smith has the haggard refinement of a postwar postgraduate. Hara Yannas's Julia is composed, defiant, her sensuality helping to tie her to the here and now. Tim Dutton makes the duplicitous O'Brien horribly plausible, even after Smith goes through some vivid horrors at his unblemished hands.

This is a chilling, relentlessly ingenious 100 minutes that uses and abuses our notions of heroism. Does the past exist objectively? Does the truth? Can you rely on your perceptions? Can love conquer all? Really? How's it going to do that, then? It's not easy to make something vividly dramatic from a novel of ideas. This pulls it off in style.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Sarah Hemming

★★★★★

Thirty years on from the date ascribed by George Orwell to his terrifying dystopian vision we can congratulate ourselves that it didn't come to pass as he imagined it. We can even joke about it, turning Big Brother into a "reality" television show, Room 101 into a jokey TV quiz game and watching both, ironically, on the slim screens that plaster our homes. But the recent fallout from Edward Snowden's revelations about surveillance may have given us pause for thought. Add to that the fact that many of us willingly surrender personal details on social media and can barely recall a past when the digital world and virtual reality did not exist, and things become more uncertain.

It's that uncertainty that drives Headlong's brilliant stage version of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and it runs through even the structure itself. Rather than just tell the story, this show, written and directed by Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan, creates a dynamic response that strips away complacency and plays on those creeping anxieties about trust, manipulation and freedom.

At the heart of the piece is still Winston Smith. Trapped in Orwell's cold war-inflected totalitarian state, Smith (played with pale, nervy intensity by Mark Arends) plods miserably through his job turning "thought criminals" into "unpersons" by removing every trace of them in records and reports. He embarks on a rebellious love affair with Julia (Hara Yannas), mistakenly places trust in the smoothly plausible O'Brien (a deeply sinister Tim Dutton) and ends up in Room 101, betraying her and surrendering his own integrity to save his skin.

But the show, inspired by the appendix to Orwell's novel, moves restlessly between Winston's present and a future in which a book group discusses his diary. Safe in the assumption that The Party has long fallen, they assume that Smith never existed. But who would want them to think that? The jagged structure draws us into Smith's increasingly tormented mind, but it also introduces unreliability into the narrative itself, replaying scenes with characters missing so we are not certain what we remember and which version of events we can trust. Are we rooting for him or spying on him? Even the torture scene, in a bleak white chamber (Chloe Lamford's chilling design), blacks out at key moments, leaving our imaginations to do the work. As O'Brien knew, it is thought control that really matters – this disturbing staging asks us whether we even know how malleable we are.

THE TIMES

Sam Marlowe



There have been plenty of theatrical versions of George Orwell's seminal dystopian novel, some dripping high-tech gloss, others stark and Brechtian. I cannot remember another as terrifying as this. The work of the indefatigably inventive Headlong, it is pitiless in its assertion that the true voice of oppression reverberates around the inside of our own skulls. We have created Big Brother, and we are unhealthily in love with him. The clocks have long since struck 13.

On its simplest level, the Nottingham Playhouse co-production, created by Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan, points up the disturbing volume of information that we willingly give away almost every moment of our hooked-up, highly automated modern lives. However, it goes deeper, questioning the real meaning of freedom and the constricting frameworks within which we consent, often unquestioningly, to live. It never relies on lurid spectacle, yet it often hurts to watch.

Crucially, this dramatisation embraces Orwell's appendix to the book, in which the constructs of Newspeak – the language imposed by the Party – are examined as if from a later, historical perspective. Its opening setting is an archive, where some sort of academic seminar appears to be in session. The text under earnest discussion is the diary of Winston Smith – what is its value, the attendees ponder, and how has the world changed? Among them is a young man for whom the discussion, interrupted by the tinny tyranny of ringing mobile phones, seems not just acutely painful, but hallucinatory. Passers-by in the hallway stare; a woman's bored, restless child appears sinister, malevolent. As the scene dissolves into kaleidoscopic fragments from Orwell's familiar narrative, the boundaries between nightmare and reality blur.

Moments of savagery and tenderness collide and coalesce, magnified on a wall of live video footage. Winston and Julia's arrest and the torture of re-education that follows, against a backdrop of clinical white, gas masks, guns and boots, are the more appalling for their use of intermittent blackout, during which we helpfully create our own mental horrors. The acting is similarly economic, unflashy, absorbing, from Mark Arends' stringy, febrile Winston, Hara Yannas's almost brutally pragmatic Julia and Tim Dutton's implacable O'Brien. This is a staging that reconsiders a classic with such steely power that it chills brain, blood and bone.

THE GUARDIAN

Lyn Gardner



The Party plays plenty of mind games in George Orwell's novel about a world ruled by the all-seeing Big Brother, where love is forbidden, history erased and language twisted. Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan, co-creators of this stage version, are not afraid of playing a few of their own in their pitilessly brilliant retelling of the doomed love affair between Winston and Julia.

Drawing on Orwell's crucial appendix entitled "The Principles of Newspeak", which follows the apparent end of the narrative, the show places past, present and future in constant dialogue. At times it feels like a vision of tomorrow, and at others like something half-remembered. Chloe Lamford's clever design offers the retro alongside the futuristic; the figure of a small child is frequently glimpsed, sometimes a sinister Midwich-Cuckoo presence, and at others a symbol of the hope Winston places in the children of the future. A snatch of the rhyme Oranges and Lemons is heard in various forms, from a hum to a ringtone.

Framed by a book club from the distant future discussing a document from the past – Winston's diary – the show is a superbly handled multimedia speculation on the nature of truth that never lets the audience off the hook. This is not an easy watch, in any sense. When Winston and Julia think that they are safe and unseen, we are spying on them on a giant screen like voyeurs. Merely by watching, we become the Thought Police. Language is treacherous, too: Winston turns betrayer simply by speaking.

The beauty of this Headlong production is that, in showing us the future, it makes us question the present. We leave the theatre less complacent about our own freedoms; less likely to swallow the lies of those who hold power.

THE TELEGRAPH
Dominic Cavendish
★★★★★

When they come for you – as they must if you commit a thought-crime, which you are bound to do – they don't just want to beat, torture and kill you. They want to take out whatever was in your mind and fill it with themselves, so that it's pure. Your sense of reality is a fiction, and they – the Party, "Big Brother", the all-powerful maybe eternal forces of totalitarianism – get to write that fiction.

Anyone can glean as much from George Orwell's dystopian masterpiece. What Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan, co-creators of this remarkable, radical touring version for Headlong, have further noticed is that that sense of mental invasiveness – that applies to the act of reading too, doesn't it? To judge by the appendix, Winston Smith's nightmare is long-past and he looked to an unknown future, our present. We put ourselves in his shoes but we're also figments of his imagination too. Are we free, as he isn't; or slaves in ways we haven't grasped?

The clock strikes thirteen – time is out of joint. Mark Arends's Winston sits alone at a table, daring to write a diary, but he's also a ghost-like presence at a book-group, discussing his actions as though they were fictional; the world he inhabits, appears lost in, is a known commodity and it bleeds, as if at some subconscious level, into the contemporary framing device. The chocolate-deprived child sitting watching the flat-screen telly while the adults pontificate is a little menace; the signature sound of "Oranges and Lemons" is heard in a mobile ring-tone; there are power failures.

Even when Orwell's narrative takes hold, it's as if it's recorded. There are sudden freezes. Parsons's bovine conversation recurs as though on a loop. It's like the theatrical equivalent of double-think; what we see is, and is not, all at once; it's up to us to hold the contradictions together. Icke and co are playing mind-games just as O'Brien does when re-educating Winston in the Ministry of Love using rats – a notorious sequence rendered with clinical, spine-tingling finesse here.

You can quibble at the absence of some of the book's most memorable aspects. I missed BB's ubiquitous eyes following us, for example. But this risk-taking experiment – a doubleplusgood collective effort that employs an ingenious video design (by Tim Reid) without looking gimmicky – supplies ample, thrilling compensations. Above all it points us back to the novel, revealing it as fully – philosophically and politically – fit-for-purpose in the 21st century, and quite possibly timeless.