

Edinburgh Fringe 2016 Review: Ears on a Beatle

The Lost Boys and Derby Live delve into the secrets of John Lennon's FBI files to fascinating effect. [Amy Gibbons](#) reviews

Saturday 27 August 2016



★★★★☆

Up two flights of stairs, hot on the tail of a steward up ahead; ushered into a dark, modest studio; skipping to the only spare seat, reminiscent of a canteen chair in the shadow of the tech desk; and cursing myself bitterly for not grabbing breakfast on the way, I'm late.

I blink, and it's the seventies. *Ears on a Beatle*, a play about secrecy and surveillance, conspiracy and counter-idealism is beginning.

Published in 2004 by Mark St Germain and performed here, at the Mint Studio at Greenside by The Lost Boys and Derby Live, *Ears on a Beatle* is set at a time of great social turmoil in America; thousands of people are protesting against the Vietnam war; Richard Nixon is seeking to be reelected; the events that sparked the Watergate scandal are underway; and John Lennon has moved to the states. The play documents investigations by two FBI agents into Lennon's political conduct, as Nixon looks to have him deported before he can too greatly influence the American vote. Drawing and redrawing the lines between what is justified by the interest of national security and what is not, the production is thoughtful, necessarily rooted in detailed context, and undeniably relevant today.

Howard Ballantine (Paul Broesmith) and Daniel McClure (Ben Adwick) play partners in the investigation, and fall into familiar roles; Ballantine the gruff, veteran agent, McClure the wide-eyed, enthusiastic

newbie. There's nothing new here, but it's not poorly executed. The pair excel most in their monologues, which on occasion prove powerful.

There's no doubt it needs some refining. At times clichéd dialogue and clichéd deliveries make for uncomfortable moments, as the audience try to figure out just how deliberately the actors play to their stereotypes. Dramatic pauses are prolonged, detective jargon is somewhat overused, and the subplots are nothing extraordinary: Ballantine has lied to his daughter about his involvement in the FBI, "I'm a businessman," he told her; McClure falls in love with his cover-partner, and jeopardises his disguise by getting her pregnant. That being said, the seventies in America *were* somewhat clichéd; that is, in the way agents spoke and conducted themselves. So this characterisation shouldn't be written off as lazy, rather perhaps lacking in conviction.

The play's triumph is in its attention to historical detail. Scenes ending with crackly radio clips specifying current events, and references to the deaths of FBI head J Edgar Hoover, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy give weight to the performance, and serve as a particular treat for political buffs. Without a working knowledge of the American seventies, however, you'd be more than a little lost.

Ending with the assassination of John Lennon in 1981, *Ears on a Beatle* spans just over a decade, giving rise to complicated queries about security and privacy. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the play is that very little actually happens, besides the events in the protagonists' own lives. Nobody finds anything on John Lennon. There's no deportation; no scandal. Empty conspiracies and sensationalised stories litter the narrative. And as for us; well, we wonder at what that's taught us.



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