



A Machine They're Secretly Building review – spies, lies and videotape

Summerhall, Edinburgh A sprint through the modern history of surveillance and the arguments states use to legitimise it makes for a chilling hour in the company of Proto-Type Theatre

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Rachel Baynton and Gillian Lees are wearing black clothes and red balaclavas. They stand before us with a slight air of menace. But this smartly intelligent hour-long whizz through the world of surveillance, and the way governments legitimise spying on their citizens, makes you question what we mean by a terrorist and where the real threat lies. If you are reading this online, the state may be watching.

You may well yawn, and say that you have seen plenty of Adam Curtis's films and you know all about the snooper's charter that passed through parliament with such ease in 2016, and you think there is nothing to fear from being caught on CCTV 70 times a day because you have nothing to hide. But as whistleblower Edward Snowden has observed: "Arguing that you don't care about the right to privacy because you have nothing to hide is no different than saying that you don't care about free speech because you have nothing to say."

Governments have plenty to hide, and Andrew Westerside's script exposes some of those secrets as it takes us on a whistle-stop tour of the history of government surveillance from 1943 wartime London to the present day via the cold war. If you feel less safe than you did 20 years

ago that may have more to do with rolling news and the fact that governments know that citizens are more compliant when tensions are higher and people more afraid. In 2015, 21 US citizens were killed in acts of terror, compared with 33,636 in gun violence.

The tone is lightly ironic as Baynton and Lees exchange information and gobble secret edible messages, and wrap each other in cling film. But while they may be the only human performers, Adam York Gregory's dense video design offers a constant barrage of images that sometimes reinforce text and often wittily undermine it.

This is coolly reasoned theatre, produced by Proto-type Theatre with stylish aplomb. If by the end it's wry, knowing tone becomes a little distancing and draining, it nonetheless lands its points with bullet-like precision. We can shrug and say that that if the UK government can read our complete browser history the loss of personal privacy is worth it to keep us safe, or we can decide that it's time to take action because Big Brother is already watching, and there seems to be no limit to what he wants to see.

Ends 27 August. Box office: 0131-560 1581. Then at Farnham Maltings, 3 October, and Southbank Centre, London, 9-11 November.

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- Theatre
- Edinburgh festival 2017
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- Edward Snowden
- Privacy
- reviews