



# My Life In CIA

by Harry Mathews



[Elisabeth Mahoney](#)

[The Guardian](#)



This is fun. Give It a Name theatre company take audiences into the streets and hidden nooks of Cardiff at dusk as they recreate scenes from the 1970s spy thriller by Harry Mathews. So the Welsh capital becomes Paris for a couple of hours, as cast members lead groups on a walking tour that weaves through landmarks – Central Station, St David's Hall – into subterranean spaces in bars, down an alleyway running behind restaurant kitchens, and across streets full of hen nights and stag parties.

The points at which this collides with the theatre of real life are terrific. Audience members don thick, black plastic glasses and walk in groups that fascinate and attract bewildered stares from passing revellers, which is very funny. You soon lose a sense of who is acting and who isn't: in one venue, a security guard tries to bar our progress ("I can't let you go down there"), grabbing his phone, and everyone just laughs as if he's part of the show.

The use of public space is clever. John Norton, playing Mathews, is a brilliant guide, encouraging us to do small, spy-type things as we walk. Emerging from a rolled-up rug wearing just his underpants, he is forced at gunpoint to make a rhyming poem from random words and does so with aplomb.

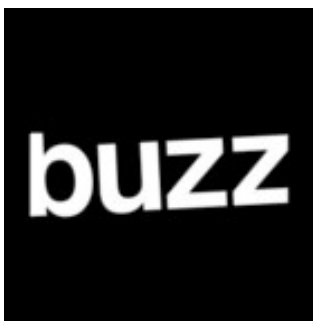


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Although fragments of this are superb, as a whole it needs a sharper focus on the plotting, and it also feels too long. And the interval is a mistake – the magic dissipates. But that magic returns at the end, as we look out over the city's skyline for the final scenes, walkie-talkies in hand and still happily wearing those silly glasses.

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Jen Thornton

[Buzz Magazine](#)



After an initial talk given by the author Harry Mathews, *My Life In CIA*, based on Matthews' autobiographical novel of the same title, took us straight into the world of 1970s Paris. Walking from place to place, with the audience split into groups to follow different routes, we were escorted by several different characters in Harry's life and heard about the intrigue, confusion, double crossing and his lovers from a number of different voices.

The production made very creative use of Cardiff's streets and locations and turned them into the streets of Paris, landmarks and places from which to spy on the action from afar. "Has anyone been to Notre Dame Cathedral before?" our guide asked before



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leading us carefully past 'worshippers' in the Prince of Wales pub.

Spying from afar was a theme that ran throughout, and the production made use of devices from speakers in a car boot to personal headsets to allow the audience to hear conversations whilst watching action several storeys below us on the streets. We switched between very close performances, in a bar or around a table, with the character speaking conversationally with us, and back to this distant observation when the characters would have no idea they were even being watched.

In addition to the various venues, we were treated to some outdoor ballet, followed by a slightly surreal walk up The Hayes to the soundtrack of solo singers situated on benches. As with any pervasive experience, it was always difficult to know what was real and what wasn't. Everywhere we looked we wondered if someone was a plant, if they were supposed to be there, if we needed to watch them. We were confidantes in a spy game, after all. This did make the production all the more exciting as we were thrown between interacting directly with the characters and a slight confusion about who to believe.

There were some wonderful performances – notably from John Norton, Katy Owen and Joanna Simpkins – but the entire cast performed well together and were completely convincing whether leading a tour, confiding secrets in the audience group or interacting with one another.

The detailed route planning must have been complex to create, but it was achieved exceptionally well. Timed to precision, we ran into other groups at carefully calculated narrative points, and discovered more back stairs and alleyways than I ever thought Cardiff had. Walking between places was a good way to create excitement and really involve the audience in the world, although a number of them were so well timed that we were forced to walk much more quickly than was comfortable.

Overall it was a really engaging evening. The direct interaction with the characters was in equal part thrilling and completely unnerving. I don't think this is a show for the faint hearted but if you like to get involved and really dig in to a story, this is definitely something to check out. Just make sure you're wearing comfortable shoes and a coat!



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[Phil Morris](#)

[Wales Arts Review](#)

It was a strange, though not unwelcome, experience to bear witness to a romantic assignation between the elusive spy and postmodernist writer Harry Mathews and a mysterious, raven-haired, female Russian agent, on a balmy summer's evening in the foyer of the Gare du Nord, accompanied by an a capella group singing La Vie en Rose – and all within the shadow of Cardiff's Millennium Stadium. Even stranger were the bemused stares from assorted hen-night and stag-do ravers, upon a street-side audience – all wearing black-rimmed glasses and colour-coded badges – congregated for a performance of Swan Lake of heroic incompetence and dazzling barefaced cheek outside St Davids Shopping Centre. Such cognitive dissonance is very much the appeal of this charmingly and wilfully perverse combination of traverse theatre, which takes in Cardiff's public spaces (doubling for Paris and Milan), various hotels and pubs, and, at one point, the back-alleys behind St Mary's Street's bars and restaurants.



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The world evoked in Give It a Name's ambitious treatment of Harry Matthews' seemingly unreliable autobiography *My Life in CIA*, is one of ultra-naff 1970s spy-thrillers blended with French situationist doodlings and post-modern reflections on the nature of chance and fate. It is also great fun.

The audience gathers at the Le Monde restaurant at 7:37, before departing in four separate groups at 20:02 - conveniently one of Harry Matthew's recommended palindromic departure times, which he claims mitigate the effects of 'travel stress dyslexia'. Each group embarks on their own particularly-designed walking tour of Paris - the Welsh capital on a Saturday night pulling off the role with uncustomary aplomb - during which a highly energetic cast pop up to deliver bizarre monologues, seminars on tantric sex and improvised poetry slams held at gun point.

It must be said that, at times, it did appear as though the cast was having more fun than the audience, and their improvisations bordered on the shambolic at times, but the overall sense of chaotic displacement, bemused alienation and affectionate parody that they created was a considerable collective achievement. Standout performances come from Dean Rehman, as Patrick Burton-Cheyne, who seemed as baffled by the evening's proceedings as his audience; and from Katy Owen as a pint-sized, though lethal, East-German assassin.

*My Life in CIA* not only overlays the Paris and Milan of Matthews' imagination across the physical geography of Cardiff, it also breaks up the text of his autobiography into a series of fragmentary, though interlinked, episodes that are distributed across its multiple locations. As such, it is difficult to trace any narrative, or construe any discernible meaning for it all without a detailed familiarity with the source material. That said, the principal pleasure of *My Life in CIA* were those moments when the familiar cityscape of Cardiff was transformed through the multi-sensory experience of travelling through a space and text that had been united through the power of performance - MA students of RWCMD's MA in Music Theatre deserve a special mention here.



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The evening is not without its difficulties, a needless ten-minute interval adds to an exhausting running time of two-and-a-half hours. The company might have easily shed a few scenes. The lack of an authored script also seemed to leave actors, on a few occasions, floundering for a line that would advance the action or delineate their character.

With its postmodern games of form and storytelling My Life in CIA belongs to a post-dramatic movement that is currently much in vogue with new and younger theatre audiences. On a personal note, I wonder if the most radical thing that might be done in the theatre right now, is simply to present two people on a stage in a darkened theatre dialoguing with each other to create narrative. And yet, as I stood with fifty other people on a fire-escape balcony at the back of St. David's Hall, watching Harry Matthews fighting slow-mo Kung Fu style with a Japanese double-agent against a projected alpine scene back-drop, I felt myself smile at the absurdity of it all and cheered along.

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My Life in the CIA, the latest interactive offering from Give It A Name Theatre and based on Harry Mathews autobiographical spy novel, relied on audience participation as it transformed Cardiff city centre into Paris for the evening.

As soon as our ticket stubs were ripped, we donned our spy glasses and prepared for a high speed caper across the streets of Paris.

Rendezvous was at Le Monde restaurant at 7.37pm where we were introduced to our tour guide. With a little imagination we could see the tree lined avenues and street cafés of the French capital below, even if in reality they were the pubs and fast food chains of St Mary Street.

Our guides worked hard to keep us entertained as we moved from site to site, going above and beyond what we might have expected.

For better or worse, the tour was frequently interrupted with questions from inquisitive locals, as the performance sprawled further across the city.

A performance of Swan Lake outside Cardiff Library seemed to be the subject of much tweeting as shoppers swiftly produced their mobile phones to capture the moment.

A special mention must go to the audience who did a brilliant job despite their lack of rehearsal.

Audience participation can often produce very little other than bashful giggles, and this reviewer herself was subject to much blushing having been plucked from the audience to participate.

By the end of the adventure at St David's Hall you'll find yourself wanting to slip your spy glasses into your bag and do it all over again.