

KEN URBAN

an introduction by
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In 2001, there was 9/11. It sounds almost biblical, doesn't it? And now, as the poet-philosopher Jean Baudrillard says, in his scandalous book *The Spirit of Terrorism*, "terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere." And, on the same page, he comes up with another metaphor: terrorism is like a double agent, following power around the world, exploiting its fragility, striking when least expected. The classic act of terror, from Jesus of Nazareth's self-sacrifice to that of this morning's suicide bomber, comes from the powerless. At the same time, state power is increasingly terroristic, so that the all-powerful and the completely powerless chase each other's shadows all across the globe, from Palestine to Chechnya, and from the Far East to the United States. It is the kind of thing that baffles many people, or freaks them out. But not Ken Urban. One of the new generation of New York playwrights, he understands the new world order perfectly.

In *The Female Terrorist Project*, Urban looks at women who embrace terrorism -- it's like taking a peek at the hidden underbelly of our times. His "dystopia in 28 scenes" focuses on Amelia, a fortysomething American academic, who is researching the stories of Leila (a Palestinian who helped hijack an American plane in 1969), Zarema (a Chechen mother who took part in the occupation of a Moscow theater in 2002), Shelley (an American antiabortionist), and Tahani (a failed suicide bomber). All of these are based on real people, but Amelia's subsequent career is fiction, a kind of freewheeling fiction set in the very near future. This mix of fact and fiction implicitly questions the current trend for verbatim theater, and appeals to the audience's sense of imaginative empathy. As Amelia says, "Facts do not tell the whole story." It also challenges our innate sense that it is only men who cause mayhem. Clearly, argues Urban, violence isn't something that just happens elsewhere -- it's as female as a tampon, as domestic as a steak knife. And, in political terms, it's not simply the prerogative of left or right. With its vision of conspiracy and punishment, *The Female Terrorist Project* is epic without being boring, political without being worthy, and humorous without being trivial. Above all, it avoids the obvious -- Patty Hearst is nowhere in sight. Yet it is also immediately relevant and asks the really important questions: what would push you, or your best friend, to take up the gun? What would you, yes you, do if you knew someone who'd planted a bomb? And, last but not least, would you help a colleague who was suspected of terrorist sympathies by the FBI?

In the long, chilly shadow of the Patriot Act, in these weird times when you might find yourself microwaving your mail during an anthrax scare, theater is a great place in which to explore these kinds of what-ifs. *The Female Terrorist Project* imagines a world that is slightly more repressive than our own -- but not much. It is typical of Urban's writing in its concern and fascination with women and violence, and with the jagged ruptures of everyday life. He loves catastrophic moments, when history seems to take a leap into the dark. As Howard Barker has taught us, catastrophe allows theater to slip off the straitjacket of naturalism and let its imagination take flight. Let's face it, humans love emotional extremes, and Urban's work is full of those. Catastrophe frees his characters to do, say and feel the unusual. Amelia doesn't behave normally -- and that's where the tension of the play comes from. Once you start caring about her, you really don't want her to do stupid things. If only she'd listen.

But as well as being relevant, *The Female Terrorist Project* is lots of fun, too. From the opening, which plays with the fact that we're gathered together in a theater, all the way to the emotional rigors of the climactic interrogation scene, the play wrongfoots your expectations and messes with your preconceptions. In *The Female Terrorist Project*, meaning is enhanced by the doubling of parts: Amelia's comrades mirror the figures of history, and the historical characters, such as Leila, provide a backstory for the fictional ones, such as Darine; Shelley reappears as Mary, a government police interrogator, and the physical presence of the same actress in both parts raises a storm of ideas about right-wing militancy and government power. Urban's collage technique -- in which scenes happen swiftly and often simultaneously -- shows his confident grasp of theatricality, just as his dialogue jumps nimbly off the page. He's influenced as much by the raw music of bands like Xiu Xiu or My Bloody Valentine, as by the explosive theater structure of Martin Crimp's 1997 masterpiece *Attempts on her Life*, or the raw intensity of the late Sarah Kane, who killed herself in 1999. Most of all, he's not afraid to offend people -- including himself.

Urban is one of those guys you'd like to keep an eye on. But it isn't easy. One minute he's working at Lincoln Center or Soho Rep in New York, and the next he's jetting over to the Annex Theatre in Seattle or looking for the Son of Semele Ensemble or maybe Moving Arts in Los Angeles. In earlier versions, *The Female Terrorist Project* was staged in 2004 as a workshop at HERE Arts Center, then produced at the Chocolate Factory, and in 2005 at Rude Guerrilla Theater in California. You might bump into Urban in his capacity as artistic director of The Committee Theatre Company in New York, or hear him teaching at Rutgers. You're bound to see his name mentioned as a new and ambitious playwright or see his work anthologized. As well as writing, Urban can be found directing, Pinter perhaps, or more likely Kane. He recently directed a workshop of her *Cleansed* at the Ohio Theater in SoHo.

And Urban's work is equally varied: just when you've managed to get a handle on his delightful *New Jersey Trilogy* -- *I (HEART) Kant*, *Nibbler* and *Halo* -- he surprises you with a new play about the suicide of President Truman's Secretary of Defense, James Forrestal: *The Absence of Weather*. In Urbanville, you might bump into a gum-chewing teenager, or Ajax the Greek mythical hero, or perhaps stumble across Fermat's Theorem or Death chatting to Everyman from the medieval morality play, or even glimpse an alien from outer space. In all his plays, wild ideas play footsie with a fine sense of history. *Nibbler*, for example, is set in 1992, just as Clinton was arriving full of promise and the darkness of the first Bush era seemed to be passing. In *Sense of an Ending*, the Rwandan genocide takes center stage, while *The Female Terrorist Project* sweeps effortlessly across more than a quarter century of contemporary politics.

Somehow, Urban also finds the time to pursue his academic work, which is mainly focused on British theater in the 1990s, the decade of Kane's *Blasted* (1995) and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996). While studying and teaching at Rutgers, he's reviewed productions of Kane's work in theater journals, showing how it exemplifies "an ethics of catastrophe". And, digging much deeper than the superficial in-yer-face shock tactics of the work, Urban appreciates both its visceral qualities and the fact that Kane "knew the stage is always, as Beckett taught us, a place of thought, and this made her push the boundaries." Inspired by this, he has also learned that a living theater is a theater that takes risks. But as well as promoting, on the American fringe, the work of the best British playwrights, Urban

has also made intellectual links between the work of Kane, Ravenhill and the like (from Phyllis Nagy to Martin McDonagh) and the Western philosophical tradition that engages with the idea of nihilism. Provocatively, he has substituted Cruel Britannia for Cool Britannia. Most originally, and most accurately, he has also drawn attention to the least understood side of Kane's work -- her humor. At moments like this, you can't help feeling that theater practitioners make the best theater academics. And always, Urban writes with consummate craft, the words tingling the brain cells and touching the senses. In *The Female Terrorist Project*, Karen says in her dream: "I whisper in his ear, don't worry, I'm here for you." As well as shocks, the play delivers verbal caresses.