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1936: a story that has to be told

With Boris Johnson booking extreme action dancers to give “guerilla” performances on and under London landmarks, the Cultural Olympiad has moved on to the front pages and the nation, and its visitors, will soon doubtless be asking: “What has this got to do with the Olympics?” In stark contrast 1936 is very much about an Olympics Games, just not this one.

Tom McNab is a name, a face and a voice known by many in the world of sport and beyond. The 78-year-old Scot was one of the first, high-profile coaches to ply his trade across more than one sport, moving successfully from athletics to bobsleigh to rugby union but he has also seen success as a novelist, a business speaker and as a film-maker, having acted as the technical advisor on David Putnam’s 1981 work *Chariots of Fire*, a cinematic classic about runners in the 1926 Olympics.

Chariots of Fire has now been rewritten as a stage play which, having been reviewed by *The Leisure Review*, is now beginning a West End run and sharing the very small niche of offerings in the Cultural Olympiad that are actually about the Olympics. The Attic Theatre Company production of McNab’s work 1936 is another, focusing as it does on the Berlin Games of that year. Hitler’s Games; or, if you prefer, Jesse Owens’ Games.

McNab has been quoted as saying, “The Olympics are about human rights, equal opportunities and human values – fairness, justice and honesty” but in 1936 he portrays a very different scenario where such values were “trampled on every day by the Nazis with their treatment of the Jews” while “the sporting nations and governing bodies did pretty much nothing about it”. The play deals with the politics and the personalities but as McNab told *The Leisure Review*, “The problem in dealing with real events is that the writer must be selective, otherwise he creates a documentary rather than a drama. Thus characters must be fused or invented, discussions imagined, events omitted, simply to present something of dramatic value.”

The play has been performed before and it is a work of which McNab is justly proud. He tells the story of its genesis as well as he tells the story within the play itself. “My interest in the 1936 Olympic Games began in a Nissen hut at RAF Uxbridge back in April 1954. An officer in the Royal Air Force, I had been on a Fighter Command athletics course when a shower of rain had driven us indoors. On went the projector and Riefenstahl’s film *Olympia*, and only a few moments later I was in tears. A lifelong commitment to sport had begun.

“Six years on, I was based in Bermuda teaching physical education and still obsessed with *Olympia*. I wrote to Riefenstahl, asking if I could buy the film. She replied almost immediately, a long letter in German, followed a week later by an English translation.

“Alas, the price was £250, well beyond my slender means, but I managed to convince the Bermudan government to purchase *Olympia*, and when it arrived I regaled my pupils with it for six months. By the time that finally I handed it on to the Bermudan authorities, I knew every single foot of Riefenstahl’s film.

“A few years later, in 1964, I met the great Jesse Owens high in the stands at the Tokyo Olympics and later that day spoke with his old coach Larry Snyder. By that time I had spoken with many athletes who had competed at Berlin, including high jump silver medalist Dorothy Tyler, who came to the first Arcola performance of 1936 in 2010.

“In the intervening years I absorbed everything that I could find on Riefenstahl and the Berlin Olympics, and it became clear to me that the story of the Games simply had to be told. My first version of 1936 appeared in 2009, the device being that the audience was observing the presentation of a radio play. In 2010 it had a successful run at the Arcola in a full stage version, and now with the help of Sidley Austin it has its appearance at the Lilian Baylis.”

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“The Olympics are about human rights, equal opportunities and human values – fairness, justice and honesty”

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1936 is being staged in the Lilian Baylis Studio of Sadler's Wells theatre from 18 July to the 4 August and will be followed by a panel discussion with McNab himself. It will draw audiences of sports people and attract the arts community but it should also appeal to the politically aware, dealing, as it does, with personal and political choices and their consequences.

"Almost every character in 1936 has a personal agenda. The German blazerati Carl Diem and Theodore Lewald simply want their treasured Olympics to find a home in Germany, whatever the cost. The IOC's leader, the devious Count Latour, has the same aim. Avery Brundage, the head of the American Olympic Committee, sees support for the IOC as a way to the ultimate leadership of the Olympic movement. Leni Riefenstahl views the Berlin Games as an ideal opportunity to advance her reputation as a film director.

"And behind everything lies the baleful presence of Hitler and Goebbels, who see the 1936 Olympics as a means by which to enhance national morale as prelude to war, and to advance Nazi Germany as a world power. The 1936 Olympic Games represents the biggest national public relations venture in modern history to that time."

It may be that rather than race or nationalism the politics of London 2012 will be those of corporate greed and government connivance. We must all hope that in 76 years nobody needs to produce a play with a rationale equivalent to McNab's wise final words to us: "What I have tried to do in 1936 is to preserve the essence of the characters, and above all to show what occurred on the first occasion that our leaders had the opportunity to challenge Nazi Germany. And failed."

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