

## 1936

### Review by Jeremy Malies

For many years, received wisdom has been that the stage and sport do not mix but this perception is gradually being undermined. Athletics is not an obvious subject but has allowed Olympic coach Tom McNab to create *1936*, a staged radio play that was performed by Attic Theatre Company at the Croydon Clocktower. The work centres on attempts by American liberals to engineer a boycott of Hitler's Berlin Olympiad. The scope of the play is broad and in a closely observed opening scene we see the Führer, who has previously dismissed the Olympic movement as "crawling with Jews and freemasons," having his eyes opened by Joseph Goebbels who is alive to the political mileage that might be gained from a successful event.

**One of McNab's many inspired devices for giving the action both political and cultural depth** is to introduce the filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl as a central character. She is immediately exposed as Hitler's hired hand as we see her filming the Nuremberg Rally prior to her treatment of the games. Widely praised at the time, *Olympia* is not only morally repugnant but at this distance can be seen as a mannered and derivative failure by a director who when she needed an aerial shot could simply call on the Luftwaffe.

The moral fulcrum of the piece is the American radio journalist William Shirer, an early critic of one-party rule in Nazi Germany, who is presented effectively by Vince Marzello in a performance that stresses the reporter's moral compass and skill as a communicator. Elsewhere **the acting is universally impressive**, reaching a high point when Adrian Schiller positively inhabits the role of Rabbi Stephen Wise as he pleads for a boycott of the Berlin Games during a 1933 anti-Nazi demonstration in New York. Peter Hamilton Dyer also succeeds as Hitler, approaching the role in a minimalist manner without once resorting to caricature.

**This multi-faceted piece of drama** reminds us that campaigning within the International Olympic Committee has always been ruthless and that **to say the Games have nothing to do with politics is to say they have nothing to do with life**. At times the action resembles a morality play, subtly aligning the Olympic spirit with basic tenets of decency. **The subject could not be more topical as London prepares for 2012** and while there is not a single anachronism; McNab's piece consistently makes us think outside the timeframe of what he depicts. We are prompted to consider the many instances in which the Olympics have taken on a political dimension, from the civil rights 'Black Power' salute on the podium of Mexico 1968 to the American withdrawal from Moscow 1980, from the 1972 Munich murders to human rights protests outside the Beijing Bird's Nest.

While it is obvious that the author has made exhaustive study of primary source material, at no time is this reproduced wholesale and the play avoids the catch-all bandwagon that is the current vogue for verbatim theatre. Already distinguished as a novelist, **McNab has proved quick out of the blocks as a dramatist with this outstanding debut**. The play was followed by an excerpt from Riefenstahl's *Olympia* and a panel discussion with the cast, playwright and 1936 high jump silver medallist Dorothy Tyler-Odam who can be seen in the film clip. At 89 she fielded a barrage of questions and appeared sufficiently spry to make the 2012 qualifying height.