



Press Release: 26 July 2011 - For immediate release

The Beekeeper **Wins New Writing Scheme**

The Beekeeper, a play by Michael Ashton, has been selected as the winner of **Pulse**, Blackeyed Theatre Company's new writing initiative. The play, which explores the relationship between a German Kommandant and a Jewish prisoner at Auschwitz, was written by Michael Ashton, who learnt to become a playwright while serving time in prison.

It is December 1944 at Monowicze, one of the labour camps at Auschwitz. Amidst the desperation and inhumanity of the Holocaust, an incredible power struggle develops between Kommandant Richard Baer and one of his prisoners, Manachem Stressler, a German Jew who survives by harvesting honey from the camp's bee hives for his captors. With Russian tanks advancing to liberate the camp, Baer's growing despair pushes both men to their limits as they seek redemption and a return to their humanity. Based on real life events, **The Beekeeper** is the incredible story of two men, the nature of power and the strength of the human spirit.

Michael Ashton was a human rights lawyer and served in the army before being sent to prison in 2007, where his inspiration for **The Beekeeper** materialised. Michael says, "When I was sent to prison I was abandoned by everyone and I often used to ruminate on why I couldn't be forgiven. Am I so terrible? So wicked? Menachem Stressler is trapped in a situation that has become his life, his world, and in most respects, as a survivor, he is utterly selfish. He does not begin to focus on the fate of his loved ones until it seems that he may even survive the camp. Richard Baer is also trapped, by politics and ideology, and in the end only martyrdom is how he perceives freedom. I deserved to go to prison, but my punishment wasn't imprisonment. It was being trapped and confined and losing everything I loved. Trapped, helpless, redemption, forgiveness, the search for what it means to be human, these are the themes which pepper my work."

He continues, "I was keen to write something about the Holocaust which highlighted the fact that certain elements of the German psyche were as much trapped by the situation they found themselves in as were the inmates of the camps. It is the old analogy about being bitten by an angry dog - don't be surprised if the dog behaves like a dog. But I didn't want the story to be just yet another Holocaust horror story. Tedious. People are inured to violence these days and if you want to see death just watch the news or go on You Tube. No, it had to be a different angle. Hence **The Beekeeper**."



In the last couple of years since leaving prison, Michael has been a guest speaker at the National, the Royal Festival Hall, Hampstead Theatre, and at Amnesty. His play **Mirrors** was selected for last year's Lost Festival and both **Peter Chamberlen's Case of Conscience** and **For Queen and Country** won Koestler awards last September. He has been commissioned by Kontreal, an American film company, to write an animated series highlighting ecological issues, and discussions on touring, National Theatre and film prospects are taking place for **The Archbishop and the AntiChrist**.

The Beekeeper will first be performed from 25 - 29 October at South Hill Park Arts Centre in Bracknell, with a London Fringe run being planned for Spring 2012. The play will be directed by Martin Jady.

Pulse is Blackeyed Theatre's initiative to encourage exciting new writing and provide writers with the chance to have their work produced in a professional environment and receive support and feedback for their future development. The scheme furthers Blackeyed Theatre's aim to create exciting opportunities for artists and audiences, balance audience needs with groundbreaking ideas and create exciting, sustainable theatre.

Blackeyed Theatre is a nationally-renowned producer of challenging mid-scale touring theatre. Audiences can find out more at www.blackeyedtheatre.co.uk.

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