

Bad Lads: Historic Abuse of Power and the Case for Radical Theatre

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In November 2025, radical theatre company Graeae – an international leader and innovator in accessible world-class theatre – showcased their latest play, *Bad Lads*, which tells the true story of the boys held at Medomsley Youth Detention Centre in County Durham in the 1980s. The play, directed by Jenny Sealey and written by Mike Kenny, from former detainee Jimmy Coffey’s story, was both gripping and devastating as the horrors of more than a thousand testimonies of abuse were channelled into the story of a single character, Jackie, a seventeen-year-old ‘lad’ from the North-East. Graeae has been producing radical theatre since the 1980s. This review examines how Graeae’s approach to radical theatre acts as both a floodlight on an abuse of power and provides an instrument of resistance, demonstrating why radical theatre matters.

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In November 2025, radical theatre company Graeae – an international leader and innovator in accessible world-class theatre – showcased their latest play, *Bad Lads*, which tells the true story of the boys held at Medomsley Youth Detention Centre in County Durham in the 1980s.¹ The play, directed by Jenny Sealey, and written by Mike Kenny, from former detainee Jimmy Coffey's story, was both gripping and devastating as the horrors of more than a thousand testimonies of abuse were channelled into the story of a single character, Jackie, a seventeen-year-old 'lad' from the North-East.

The production opens with a warning on the screen: 'This play is short, sharp and shocking'. This refers to the UK Government's policy 'experiment' that locked away perceived 'problem' young people in detention centres under prison-like conditions in the 1980s.² The policy, alleged to provide a 'short, sharp shock', was supposed to deter young people from future acts of criminality. It was part of a new 'get tough approach' of the recently elected Conservative Party that had 'conducted their entire general election campaign of 1979 around the themes of law and order'.³ The then Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, described the government's aim for detention centres to be 'hard', crudely framing them as 'no holiday camps', so that 'those who attend them will not ever want to go back'.⁴ In Jackie's case – and many of the other young men abused at Medomsley, a crude 'short, sharp shock', left a 'legacy of those few weeks for a lifetime'.⁵

Graeae has been producing radical theatre that 'demolishes barriers to accessing live performance' since the 1980s.⁶ In *Bad Lads* case, Jackie's story is told by three actors: Robin Paley Yorke as young Jackie, Danny Raynor as older Jackie, and Craig Painting as signing Jackie, who interprets British Sign Language throughout as a character rather

¹ 'Bad Lads', Graeae, n.d. <<https://graeae.org/event/bad-lads/>> [accessed 1 April 2026].

² John Muncie, 'Failure Never Matters: Detention Centres and the Politics of Deterrence', *Critical Social Policy*, 10.28 (1990), pp. 53–66 (p.53), doi:[10.1177/026101839001002804](https://doi.org/10.1177/026101839001002804).

³ Muncie, 'Failure Never Matters', p.59.

⁴ David Thornton, and others, 'Tougher Regimes in Detention Centres: Report of an evaluation by the Young Offender Psychology Unit', Home Office (HMSO, 1984), p.1.

⁵ Sue O'Rourke, 'Giving a Voice to the "Bad Lads"', British Psychological Society, 11 August 2025 <<https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/giving-voice-bad-lads>> [accessed 30 March 2026].

⁶ Jenny Sealey and Carissa Hope Lynch, 'Graeae: An Aesthetic of Access — (De)Cluttering the Clutter', in *Identity, Performance and Technology: Practices of Empowerment, Embodiment and Technicity*, ed. by Susan Broadhurst and Josephine Machon (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2012), pp. 60–73, doi:[10.1057/9781137284440_5](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137284440_5).

than an addendum to the side of the stage, as is often the case. This integration of the three Jackies not only echoes the multiplicity of experiences of abuse at Medomsley but also communicates Graeae's radical position – to make everyone, from audience to contributors, feel included in this story for ninety or so minutes. As an audience, you experience past, present, and moments of pause across all three Jackies. Whether hearing or deaf, Jackie speaks to you directly on centre stage.

This bespoke approach to inclusion, which sets Graeae apart as 'a flagship organisation', able to carefully and consciously tackle such challenging stories, becomes acutely clear through the development process of *Bad Lads*. The idea for the production arose from clinical psychologist Dr Sue O'Rourke's professional experience of undertaking dozens of assessments with men who had spent time at Medomsley, on behalf of a solicitor's firm specialising in abuse cases. O'Rourke sought to 'give a voice to the bad lads that no one had listened to'. But, recognising that it was not her story to tell, O'Rourke felt compelled to reach out to childhood friend and artistic director of Graeae, Jenny Sealey, who she believed would give voice to these previously silenced stories.⁷ Sealey arranged for the men to become co-writers, supported by O'Rourke as well-being lead. This arrangement provided a supportive environment for the men to feel truly heard, as was echoed in the words of one of the six men involved in the play's development who, 'despite years of contact with mental health professionals', shared that 'this was the first time he felt listened to and safe'.⁸

As Jackie's story unfolds on stage, you might be forgiven for thinking there must have been a public inquiry into thousands of instances of abuse at Medomsley. In fact, no such inquiry has ever taken place. In 2013, an investigation known as 'Operation Seabrook' was launched at the local level by Durham police. This led to 1123 men coming forward with reports of sexual or physical abuse, and eight years later, this sparked a special investigation commissioned by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman. In November 2025, almost forty years after Medomsley closed, the UK government published the first acknowledgement of its failings in the form of an open letter to the victims and survivors. Many feel these investigations and the letter do not go far enough.⁹

The lack of public knowledge about Medomsley underscores the importance of *Bad Lads*, and the value of Graeae's work more broadly. Arguably, radical theatre, and more specifically Graeae's unique approach, developed over four decades, made

⁷ Sue O'Rourke, 'Giving a Voice to the "Bad Lads"'.

⁸ Sue O'Rourke, 'Giving a Voice to the "Bad Lads"'.

⁹ Simon Hattenstone, "'Possibly the Most Prolific Sex Offender in British History': The inside Story of the Medomsley Scandal", Society, *The Guardian*, 20 November 2025 <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2025/nov/20/possibly-the-most-prolific-sex-offender-in-british-history-the-inside-story-of-the-medomsley-scandal>> [accessed 1 April 2026].

it possible for the men to challenge the abuses of power at the heart of this national scandal. Like Hannah Arendt's assertion that drama is the 'political art par excellence', *Bad Lads* stresses the continued power of radical theatre to tell the stories that have been silenced by authority.¹⁰ *Bad Lads* not only exemplifies the dangers of an institution left unregulated, it also shows how 'politics is not merely redoubled in theatre but in some sense comes to depend upon it'.¹¹

Bad Lads played at seven theatres across the UK in October and November 2025, and is now in conversation to be developed into a television adaptation.¹² Although still speculative, if such a television series about Medomsley were produced, this could bring intensified public and political pressure to calls for a public inquiry, drawing inspiration from the recent success of Gwyneth Hughes' ITV television series, *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*. After decades of campaigning and years of journalism, it was a dramatised version that got the 'British public to pay proper attention' to the need for an inquiry into the Horizon IT system which saw hundreds of sub-postmasters unjustly prosecuted for fraud and theft.¹³

If *Bad Lads* was to be translated into a political drama, this would only have been possible because of Graeae and O'Rourke's thoughtful and caring approach to radical theatre, which made it conceivable for the men to speak publicly. In seeing their words listened to and reflected back to them from the stage, and in the audience notes shared after each show, *Bad Lads* decisively affirms that their voices matter.



Photograph of audience comment card taken during post-show discussion at Unity Theatre Liverpool, 5th November 2025, copyright: Naomi Weaver.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, 1958), p. 188.

¹¹ Sue O'Rourke, 'Giving a Voice to the "Bad Lads"': Richard Halpern, 'Theater and Democratic Thought: Arendt to Rancière', *Critical Inquiry*, 37.3 (2011), pp. 545–72, JSTOR, doi:[10.1086/659358](https://doi.org/10.1086/659358).

¹² There are plans for the show to be translated into a television series, potentially produced by Jack Thorne, shared by Jenny Sealey during post-show talk at Unity Theatre Liverpool, 5th November 2025.

¹³ Tim Adams, "'The Timing Was Impeccable': Why It Took a TV Series to Bring the Post Office Scandal to Light", UK News, *The Guardian*, 13 January 2024 <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/jan/13/mr-bates-vs-the-post-office-why-it-took-a-tv-series-to-bring-the-post-office-scandal-to-light>> [accessed 1 April 2026].

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