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MULTIPLE BAD THINGS

COMMISSIONED BY
BACK TO BACK
THEATRE FOR THE
WORLD PREMIERE
SEASONS OF MULTIPLE
BAD THINGS IN
GEELONG, BRUSSELS
AND MELBOURNE

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As I sit down to write, the Australian Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs is attempting to rush new legislation through parliament to give him extraordinary powers to target countries rejecting people (primarily refugees and asylum seekers) that Australia is attempting to deport. These powers would also allow the Commonwealth Government to jail those in immigration detention if they do not cooperate with plans for their deportation. At the same time the country is negotiating the outcome of the failed referendum in October 2023 to give Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders 'a voice' to parliament. The campaign to achieve a 'voice' aimed to give First Nations people a forum to inform policy and legal decisions that impact their communities. It was heralded as a crucial step in reconciling a nation divided by racism and the legacy of a brutal colonial past. Its failure has left deep wounds among First Nations people and their allies and left the nation in an openly fractured state, where previously thinly veiled divisions are now visible in plain sight and entrenched along political, social and cultural lines. While these events are only one part of the domestic picture, they need to be named, as they are some of the 'bad things' that shape the context in which Back to Back Theatre works. When we reflect on this scenario by zooming out to the wider global situation, things begin to look dire indeed. From Ukraine to the genocide in Palestine, to the rise of populism and the breakdown of democracy, never mind the threat of AI and global climate disaster, we are in a space of 'multiple bad things'. This is a space in which life can feel overwhelming, where many of us carry a sense of both responsibility and hopelessness and an uncertainty about how to act, how to be good and how to care. But we must try. We must go on. There is simply no alternative.

In this situation of global and local upheaval, threats and 'bad things', we look to art for help. Sometimes it is a space for escape, for opening new ways of thinking, feeling or responding to our surroundings, other times it provokes us to act for change, or to consider events, experiences or ideas we may already have thought about, differently. As theatre scholar and critic Hans-Thies Lehmann notes 'it is the task of art to sharpen our senses for the exception, to cultivate the exception' Back to Back do exactly this. Their performances might leave us perplexed or uncertain but in time we realise that we have had the opportunity

to sharpen our senses, to consider what is important and to think deeply on how we might negotiate and respond to that. They demand in subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways that we examine who we are and how we interact with others and the world around us. That we reflect on how we might live a life of care for small and large things, in this fraught environment.

The Back to Back ensemble has never shied away from bad things. They know the world we live in intimately. Yet, as the Directors note, it is also one that often excludes them. As previous shows such as Food Court, demonstrate, this gives the ensemble a powerful vantage point. They are acute observers of society, of politics and of culture, of the micro and macro processes and experiences that take place every day. They know things and they use this knowledge to inform their practice.

Each performance is exquisitely crafted from the raw material that is all around us. News stories, experiences drawn from everyday life, intimate interactions, moments of joy, of pain, of pleasure and of absurdity. All of this becomes the raw material that is brought into the devising and rehearsal process. Each starts with a seed, an idea or a provocation and grows from there. In an intense process of workshopping and collaboration the final focus of the work emerges and develops. The result is at times sparse, at others complexly layered, it is also funny and necessarily confronting. The ensemble always speak back to society and demand a plurality of perspectives, of voices and of stories. In doing so they make multiple small cracks in the edifice of exclusion, oppression and of power, one performance at a time. Through their works they call for other ways of being, ways that are generative, productive and collaborative. They invite new images and new considerations of what it might mean to deal with and respond to 'multiple bad things'. Importantly, too, they do not just render these stories and considerations, instead, they invite us, or perhaps even demand, that as spectators we step into the work and reflect deeply on our responsibility to acknowledge the status quo – however fraught, and then to 'imagine new ways to be' (Directors notes).