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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

2024



## UNSAFETY, AND THE ANGLE OF THE STRIKE

Memory fails. Details drip through the mesh. What we're left with, overwhelmingly, is the feeling. The scars, you could say. And underneath the scars either a numbness or, more often, a heightened sensitivity. Which is to say, memory doesn't really fail. Sometimes we wish it would fail better.

I want to tell you a story. A story being a version of a memory.

You're in secondary school, on a long bus trip to somewhere deemed educational. Two boys across the aisle take turns to harangue you with assessments of your appearance. Elliptical orbits of cruelty, moving towards what upsets you, then veering away, only to return again. Where are they taking you?

And, no, I haven't told you what they said. Perhaps you can imagine, or remember. You're looking out the window, trying to stay focused on the horizon through the blur of roadside eucalypts, the shudder in your chest. It all goes on for a long time.

When the bus pulls over for a toilet stop, the abuse, too, pauses. Wandering around the dusty playground, you notice one of the boys lurking nearby. Holding back tears, you reach out your hand, offering it to him as – what? some kind of gesture of reconciliation? why are you the first to reach out? He looks confused, stunned for a long moment, unsure whether to laugh or walk toward you, your outstretched hand holding only air.

Did you want peace, or merely for the conflict to be over?

I've said "your outstretched hand", but maybe you were one of the other kids, your ears plugged with music. Or a teacher, or a bus driver. Maybe you were the bully.

These things matter, who did what to whom, in which place, carrying which histories.

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It hardly bears repeating. We all want to be safe. Especially now.

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Yet we will never be. That era has passed, calved off like another sheet of ice from our sense of what we deserve.

Climate-change-fuelled bushfires, floods and drought. Crop failures. Being made redundant. Your bank account suddenly emptied. In the tram, someone coughing on you, the one day you forgot your mask. I won't mention what else can happen. You've felt those shadows too.

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Sometimes, trying to be safe, groping in the darkness, we find violence. We sulk or seethe. We insist and threaten, lash out. We hold a weapon aloft. We say those words.

There's a phenomenon people call "lateral violence". It's where someone lashes out at another member of their own marginalised community, rather than the actual sources of their disempowerment. Call it "punching across" rather than "punching up".

It happens. Quite often. Though I'm not sure if naming it helps much, or is enough. Too easily, we become obsessed with the angle of the strike rather than the effect of it, how it keeps us within the choreography of violence and separation.

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Every time I witness a Back to Back performance, I feel exfoliated, a layer of pretence scrubbed away.

Characters are cruel to each other. In key moments, tender. They enact impossible, and all-too-familiar, dramas which bloom suddenly, darkly or with brilliant light and great relief, out of the myths we hold sacred. Meanwhile, Death Weather watches us, or simply gazes at a screen. My own particular traumas have their bandages torn off, and I see them in an array of other violences and confusions.

Their enactments break the fourth wall. Then the third, second and first. So here we are.

Whenever I thought of Multiple Bad Things, I felt I had to rewrite this essay. No, it's not about work, it's about home. No, it's about identity. No, language. Or, colonialism. Maybe violent invasion, the spectre of utter vulnerability. At times, I felt I shouldn't write about my own experience. But, no, it never disappears. It can only be transformed, or storied differently. Ushered into a chorus.

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Sometimes I think of Adelaide woman Ann Marie Smith, whose life, person, dreams and pleasures were much larger than the reason she ended up in the news. She was left in the same woven cane chair for months, died of septic shock and multiple organ failure. Her carer was sentenced to seven years for manslaughter. Multiple civil actions have been taken out against Integrity Care SA, which can no longer operate under the NDIS.

Other times I think of Loddon prison or the police station near where I live, and the Aboriginal people who have died there. Clinton Austin, artist, brother, a man finding the stories and pride of his culture, waiting too long for parole, found unresponsive in his cell. Tanya Day, who fell asleep on a train, reported to police, taken to the cells under an archaic public drunkenness law. Neither of them safe. No-one held responsible for their deaths.

To be honest, I don't think of them often. Why? Perhaps because of what I don't share with them. I don't need personal care on an hourly or daily basis. I'm "independent" (though who is, entirely?). I'm not Indigenous. Police don't eye me suspiciously, or distrust my testimony.

Their absence in my mind is perhaps also because our culture and the tech companies go to great lengths to keep us preoccupied with what is inside our own bubbles. The fourth wall, glistening and intact.

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We can't be safe without a portion of surrender. As advocate and author Son Vivienne writes, "universal safety is equally aspirational and elusive" (Queering Safe Spaces, ix). To promise it is guarantee disappointment. Instead, "we should address most urgent needs, offering stabilization that can lead to sitting

together in quiet reflection". In this moment, exposed, we have to relinquish the assumption of purity, of ourselves or others. Then, we have to speak, and to listen, without taking up words as shields or as weapons.

Still, you might ask, who can I sit with? And how will our urgent needs be met?

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