

Geelong's Back to Back Theatre transforms Melbourne's Hamer Hall



Back to Back Theatre's Romany Pop on the set of *Lady Eats Apple* at Hamer Hall in Melbourne. Picture: David Geraghty

MATTHEW WESTWOOD THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM October 7, 2016

Audiences familiar with the work of Geelong ensemble Back to Back Theatre know to expect transformative performances from the group that includes actors with intellectual disabilities.

For its latest show, Back to Back has also brought about a transformation of Arts Centre Melbourne's prestige concert venue, Hamer Hall.

The play, *Lady Eats Apple*, is presented within an inflatable auditorium, itself sitting on the stage within the hall. Ticketholders enter via an inflated airlock, squeezing themselves one at a time into the performance area.

The inflatable stage also allows for rapid transformations that may metaphorically, if not literally, blow the audience away.

"When we have used inflatables in this way previously, the audience experiences quite a radical temperature shift, because the inflatable heats up to the body temperature of the audience," said Back to Back artistic director Bruce Gladwin.

"It's a visceral effect."

The shape-shifting stage may be appropriate for the play about creation stories, from the gods of classical antiquity to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

One of Back to Back's longtime members, Sarah Mainwaring, plays Eve in the

story.

Back to Back's acclaimed performances — ambitious in scope, and evoking a strong sense of shared humanity — are devised by the ensemble under Gladwin's direction.

Work on *Lady Eats Apple* started when actor Simon Laherty suggested the group explore ideas for a tragedy, and the theme was developed during a residency by company members at London's Victoria and Albert Museum two years ago. Executive producer Alice Nash said the hour-long performance would be epic in scope, yet also “extraordinarily intimate and personal”.

Lady Eats Apple is expected to tour after its premiere tomorrow at the Melbourne Festival: it has been supported by other interstate festivals and venues as well as international partners.

Back to Back was the recipient earlier this year of an \$800,000 grant from the federal government's Catalyst fund, to help it undertake international projects.

It is also developing its first project for the screen, a 30-minute piece with the working title *Bunghole*, to be presented by the Adelaide Film Festival and the ABC.

But Gladwin said *Lady Eats Apple* was the 28-year-old group's most ambitious project to date.

“There is something incredibly audacious about coming to a large venue like Hamer Hall,” he said.