

Bruce Gladwin's *Lady Eats Apple* is creation revelation of sorts



Mark Deans and Sarah Mainwaring. Picture: Jeff Busby

CHRIS BOYD THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM October 11, 2016

In Back to Back's 2002 Melbourne Festival show *Soft*, a young woman discovers that her unborn child has Down syndrome.

As you'd expect from Back to Back, the doctor making the diagnosis and her assistant (and the actors playing them) have DS. The (unaffected) counsellor called in by the doctor coolly tells the pregnant woman she can abort.

Though more directly confrontational than the company's fare in the 1½ decades before and the 1½ decades since, *Soft* could be restaged without a word changed and look as if it were written last week, especially with more accurate testing now available and after the recent lobbying in Ohio for legislation to prohibit abortion on the grounds of a DS diagnosis.

Back to Back's new show is more abstract in conception and cosmic in scale but it references the earlier work in its set and sound design.

Soft was performed in a vast inflated womb inside a shed at Docklands. Audiences entered the space through a long translucent fallopian tube. Entry to *Lady Eats Apple* is through labia. And, this time, the fabric cave is more solid, and a light-sucking black.

On stage is a bearded young man (Scott Price) and an older man (Brian Lipson with wild grey hair, looking for all the world like Killer Bob in *Twin Peaks*). The volatile younger man is an Old Testament-style God, creating the world a species

at a time for his Adam (Mark Deans) and Eve (Sarah Mainwaring) to name. He is paranoid, hot tempered and insecure.

The unidentified older man, possibly Lucifer, is the creator's patient and wary mentor. He is envious of mortals whose every experience is fraught with the possibility that it might be the last.

Conceived and directed by Bruce Gladwin, *Lady Eats Apple* is reminiscent of Romeo Castellucci's work for the stage and Kenneth Anger's more esoteric work for the screen.

It's sensuous, ambiguous and never quite resolves to a dramaturgical tonic note.

Technically, it's a masterpiece. The animation, music and lighting are exquisitely judged. A column of pale neon plasma, like one of those flailing inflatable men you see outside discount stores, materialises in the gloom and is passed from hand to hand like extraterrestrial fire.

There's an extended musical interlude — a single reverbed guitar — that rings and erupts like a stellar nursery might. Perhaps it is the sound of life itself. It's a weighty and wonderfully indulgent moment. Its crescendo, and what follows, is a coup de theatre. But the reveal, finally, is more memorable than the revelation.

Lady Eats Apple. By Bruce Gladwin and Back to Back Theatre. Melbourne Festival. Hamer Hall, October 8. Tickets: \$69-\$79. Bookings: 1300 182 183 or online. Duration: 70min, no interval. Until tomorrow.