WINGING IT

This Melbourne Festival, performers are making audiences part of the show
Many of this year’s Melbourne Festival shows seek active involvement by the audience, writes JOHN BAILEY.

It’s common for actors to quash suggestions about how the “liveness” of theatre makes it such a rewarding experience. While film and TV are relatively cold affairs, the stage is apparently a place where anything can happen in the moment. Still, when you’re taking up for your hundredth round as Lady Bracknell, you can be pretty sure exactly how your night is going to pan out. There’s a very good reason most actors are terrified by the thought of improvisation.

This year’s Melbourne Festival is stuffed with work that’s unfinished, however, and in fact won’t be complete until it’s in front of an audience: “A performance maker is always a maker of encounters,” artist Sarah-Jane Norman says. “At a very basic level I’d say that most artists are seeking, through their work, to have a conversation with their audience.”

Live art installation Take this for a fact is a body Wash that conversation: Washed around the experience of sharing a cup of tea, it in part connects the moment it takes place with the life of Norman’s Indigenous ancestors. “My great-grandmother would have served tea to the station master she worked for thousands of times in her lifetime. Taking tea also suggests a meeting of equals. It is consolatory, comforting, domestic — a basic ritual of sustenance and sharing of space.”

But there is more to this cuppa and chat, as the accompanying scenes include Norman’s own blood as an ingredient. As you’d expect, results vary: “Some people are totally freaked out, others are very emotional, others are completely nonplussed. Older people often ask me for seconds because older people can be wonderfully1 thermos and are generally less squeamish.”

Norman’s other festival installation, In the River’s Children, is also an open-ended one. The viewer contributes an item of white clothing which the artist hand washes in silence while the surrounding space is haunted by reminders of the massacres of Indigenous Australians across history. It’s an attempt to produce a site for collective grieving and a reckoning with the blood. The presence of the viewer is integral. “I am not interested in entertaining an audience passively,” Norman also not interested in just telling a story, assailing an audience with images. I am interested in how we occupy and activate a space together, and how the actions we undertake or participate in raise questions which are then allowed to resonate and linger in our lives.”

New York choreographer Faye Driscoll makes dance in which the audience’s response is part of the work. She was never interested in the kind of abstract dance that wouldn’t suffer a bit if no one turned up to watch it. She was the kid who penned poems against nuclear war and stuck them on neighbours’ doors. Of course she grew up to make art that tries to do something tangible. “The generation that taught me was this very postmodem generation where you don’t have any effect and it’s just pure movement or abstraction. I think I rejected that and when I started to make my own work I felt like ‘why am I doing this’? Who is this for?”

Driscoll’s obsession with her audience’s experience is evident in the title of her trilogy: Thank You for Coming. The first part of which, Attendance, will make its Australian debut this festival. “The physicality of the work is striking, as performers tangle themselves into an intricate mass that transcends the individuals. I wanted to create an interdependent architecture that was unstable. That wasn’t an even web where things felt stable but was like my experience of negotiating traffic or being on the subway in New York where all the bodies are too close. It’s like many needs are trying to happen simultaneously.”

It does something to its viewers. “There’s been the surprising thing of witnessing a playing in a lot of people. A kind of desire to be involved in it.”

The audience definitely on who the audience is. In Argentina, a culture with a lot of touch, when performers near their onlookers, “it was as if if they” wanted to hug us and hold us”. In Minnesota, by contrast, everyone was “just 10 feet away”.

Australian director Sam Routledge has built an element of the unknown into the structure of his family show You and Me and the Space Between. Based on a story by Fime Sachs, the work is illustrated live by a different cartoonist in every city it plays. Even though Melbourne will see the show’s third season, Routledge says that each opening night gives him the same jitters as a show’s debut.

“But that’s outweighed by the continual work you get to do on a new Australian work. This is a new Australian work that engages with form experimentally and each time we do it we find new things. If I remind myself that I’m getting that opportunity, then I can deal with the anxiety of the unexpected.”

The show also features a different narrator in each town, which again fundamentally alters it. “I’m really interested in diverse voices as much as possible, and that can be done with whether they’re trained or not. If there’s a trained voice that has that theatricality that we’re used to hearing, or if they have quite a broad Australian voice, what’s the difference between having those voices on stage?”

Geoffrey’s Back to Black Theatre has long featured in the unpredictable when making work. Small metal objects was set on the soundtrack of a railway station at rush hour, while Food Court’s soundtrack was improvised live by jazz outfit the Nickels each night. “There’s always an element where things could be quite different tonight,” director Bruce Gladwin.
says, “In some ways having that element you can’t control just re-energises the performance for the actors and the company each night.”

Like all of Back to Back’s work, its festival entry Lady Eats Apple was developed through a long period of improvisation by the company’s ensemble. Its scope is epic and the production is by far the company’s largest on the physical scale, but Gladwin says that certain formal choices also “feel like an exciting development for the company.”

One involves a sequence in which the audience undergoes “an experiential sense that they’re, in fact, lost and there’s a sense of being abandoned.” At one point characters may become unsure how much of the narrative is taking place before them and how much in their own heads.

“Some of the best experiences for me as an audience member is when there’s a sense that the narrative is taking place in the audience’s heads as opposed to on stage. Often when it’s clearly taking place on stage the audience is well ahead of the action and knowing where it’s going to head to, but that sense of watching something and going, ‘I’ve got no idea where this is going, what’s going on?’ You’re firing with those questions, wondering where it’s leading to.”

Rijben Theatre’s artistic director Rachael Maza agrees that embedding the unpredictable can enhance a theatrical encounter. “When an audience sits there and goes, ‘I don’t know how long it’s going to be, is that person even meant to be onstage or did they just walk on? Is that kid a part of the show? Is that dog a part of the show?’ I think that that something is made accessible to the participant. Suddenly they’re no longer a passive participant. They become part of this unfolding, unpredictable experience.”

Maza says that Rijben’s festival entry, Tandemurn is unlike anything else the company produces. Tandemurn makes theatre with scripts and characters and stories, whereas Tandemurn is a public coming together of the five clans of the Kulin nation for an evening of song, dance and ritual culminating in a mass dance where everyone is invited to join in. “Tandernurn absolutely sits alone in terms of the body of work Rijben does,” Maza says. “It’s fundamentally changed who we are as a company and our relationships with the community here. It’s been extraordinarily powerful for the organisation to utilise our capacity and skills to work very closely and much more broadly than just making theatre. Which is always our brief, we’ve never just wanted to make pretty theatre, but Tandernurn has really helped ground that.”

This Melbourne Festival will be the fourth in a row to begin with a Tandemurn, but until 2013 the ceremony had not been held since the early 1800s. The power of the exchange, held under open skies at Federation Square, is of the kind of thing it’s almost impossible to produce in a convention theatre. “I don’t know what it is but when I sit in the crowd I cry every time I see it. Kids, elders, and right there in the middle of Goddamn Melbourne’s concrete and skyscrapers, there’s this song and language that seems to penetrate through all of that.”

Rijben’s work on Tandernurn has allowed the company to reconsider the limitations of theatrical convention.

“That’s one of theatre’s weaknesses, this idea of a fourth wall and a passive audience. One of the conversations we’re constantly having here is about the kind of theatre we’re making. What is the theatre that starts to break down those Western paradigms, the four walls, the idea that you start with a script and a dramaturge. Where dance and song and storytelling live there’s no separation between the art forms. We’re constantly questioning ourselves as artists and theatre makers, how we embed these indigenous ways of storytelling. So, in fact, Tandemurn has been a light to us.”

The Melbourne Festival opens on Thursday and runs until October 23 festival/melbourne/2016.