MELBOURNE INSIDE OUT

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WINGING IT

This Melbourne Festival, performers are making audiences part of the show

SHARE THE STAGE

Many of this year's Melbourne Festival shows seek active involvement by the audience, writes JOHN BAILEY.

It's common for actors to gush 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 lacing 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 it is my body* makes that conversation literal: based 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 conciliatory, comforting, domestic, a basic ritual of sustenance and sharing of space."

But there is more to this cuppa and chat, as the accompanying scones 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 wonderfully shameless 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 dead. The presence of the viewer is integral. "I am not interested in entertaining audience passivity. I am 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'd grow up to make art that tries to do something tangible.

"The generation that taught me was this very postmodern generation where you don't have any affect and it's just pure movement or abstraction. I think I reacted against 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 work is striking, as performers tangle themselves into an intricate mass that transcends the individual. "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."

'That's one of theatre's weaknesses, this idea of a fourth wall and a passive audience.' Rachael Maza

It does something to its viewer: "There's been the surprising thing of witnessing a craving in a lot of people. A kind of desire to be involved in it." The outcome depends on who the audience is. In Argentina, a culture with a lot of touch, when performers neared their onlookers, "it was almost as if they wanted to hug us and hold us". In Minnesota, by contrast, everyone, "sat 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 Finegan Kruckemeyer, 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 that's debuting.

"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 to do with sexuality, race, but it can also be to do with whether they're trained or not. If theirs is 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?"

Geelong's Back to Back Theatre has long factored in the unpredictable when making work. *Small Metal Objects* was situated on the concourse of a railway station at rush hour, while *Food Court*'s soundtrack was improvised live by jazz outfit the Necks 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 onlookers 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."

Ilbijerri Theatre's artistic director Rachael Maza agrees that embracing the unpredictable can enhance a theatrical encounter. "When an audience sits there and goes, 'I don't know where this is going, 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 then 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 Ilbijerri's festival event *Tanderrum* is unlike anything else the company produces. Ilbijerri makes theatre with scripts and characters and stories, whereas *Tanderrum* 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. "*Tanderrum* absolutely sits alone in terms of the body of work Ilbijerri 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 *Tanderrum* has really helped ground that."

This Melbourne Festival will be the fourth in a row to begin with a *Tanderrum*, 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 the kind of thing it's almost impossible to produce in a conventional 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."

Ilbijerri's work on *Tanderrum* 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 theatremakers, how we embed these Indigenous ways of storytelling. So, in fact, *Tanderrum* has been a light to us."

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

Clockwise from main: Sarah Mainwaring, Scott Price and Simon Laherty from *Lady Eats Apple*; *Terrapin - You and Me and the Space Between*; *Tanderrum*; Ilbijerri Theatre's artistic director Racheal Maza and actor Jack Charles; Faye Driscoll in *Thank You For Coming*. **Photos:** Simon Schluter, Peter Mathew, Pat Scala

Haircuts by Children, devised by the Canadian theatre company Mammalian Diving Reflex.

SPOTLIGHT ON YOU

Some festival shows are so open-ended that the audience *is* the work. Take *The Money*, for example. Participants sit around a table, piled with cash from their ticket purchase. They have one hour to debate how it will be spent, and the decision must be unanimous.

The show's director, UK artist Seth Honnor, doesn't like the term "audience participation" – "as soon as there's audience participation in a show I'm kind of out" – and prefers to describe the experience as an immersive one. It's still theatre, he says. Even though the cast is drawn from the general public and they're given no script, "there are characters and they rise and fall like any play that you see".

"What's extraordinary about it is the narrative arc that gets formed out of ordinary people having a conversation. And the fact that leaders rise and fall and new characters come to the fore and disappear again."

Of course, everyone always wants to know what the money has been spent on. One show saw £800 ($1350) sent to Africa in one-pound denominations, while another launched two audience members on a trip to spend time with a distant elderly relative. Short of anything illegal, it's up to the crowd.

But the spend is less interesting than the conversation to Honnor. "The results for me are more about the whole experience and the question that it asks us all," he says. "What it does is it gets to ideas and values and behaviours very quickly."

Like *The Money*, Canadian company Mammalian Diving Reflex's *Haircuts by Children* is a playfully provocative piece whose most interesting outcome isn't the obvious one.

The work allows you to have your mop cut or coloured by a kid, but creator Eva Verity says the haircut you receive is less interesting than the encounter between adult and child. When you go for your regular cut, "so much of it is about that hour-long conversation, this catch-up session with this person you see however frequently. And similar conversations are had between the clients and the children".

"Something that's always a pleasant thing to hear is the kinds of conversations people have with the children and the ways in which they're so often shocked by the intimacy or carefulness of both the act of having their hair cut by a child and the conversation."

And while the conceit seems simple, there's something radical about inverting the usual power relations between kids and grown-ups – not to mention the matter of trust when there are sharp implements so close to your head.

"We don't spend very much time talking with children for extended periods, unless it's your own children or you're a teacher," says Verity. "I'd say the average person doesn't spend much time having conversations with a young child. That in itself is an experience."