

## THE AUSTRALIAN

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### Oddlands focuses on actors' skills, and shows off some new ones

*Oddlands* by Back to Back theatre.

PHILIPPA HAWKER THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM October 4, 2017

#### [Link to article](#)

Take a ship of fools, a contaminated landscape, an innovative theatre company, a film and television production house and a spirit of inquiry, and the result is *Oddlands*, a singular and surprising short work for the screen.

*Oddlands* is the first foray into film for Back to Back Theatre. It will have its world premiere this month at Adelaide Film Festival. Back to Back Theatre, based in Geelong, is a contemporary theatre company with a strong local connection, an international reputation and a creative history spanning 30 years.

It is made up of an ensemble of six performers, all of whom are perceived to have an intellectual disability. Back to Back's works are created by the ensemble and artistic director Bruce Gladwin, who has been with the company since 1999.

It has built a reputation for theatrical inventiveness, for a collaborative approach and for making work that is challenging, in the best way, for audiences.

*Oddlands* focuses on two workers, Des (Simon Laherty) and Tam (Sonia Teuben), who are cleaners in a contaminated area to which they are transported by bus.

The idea, says Gladwin, was derived from the medieval trope of the ship of fools, "in which towns gathered up all the people who were disabled or mad or old or for some reason not wanted. They put them on an old ship and sent them down the river to the next town."

Back to Back took up "that idea of getting rid of people, and we tried to find a contemporary idea around that".

At first, they looked at a more comic scenario in which workers had to fix a hole in a nuclear power plant. Then, he says, reading about the 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant provided them with another image.

"It was about people being brought in to clean houses. They had two roles: one was to clear out all the food, and the other was to kill the domestic pets, with the idea of minimalising the spread of disease."

Sonia Laherty and Simon Teuben in *Oddlands*.

So Des and Tam work for a company called Civix (whose disembodied instructions are voiced by Belinda McClory). They are going about their business as usual when they meet an unexpected challenge: there's a human being (Jacek Koman) in the middle of the wasteland, whose presence sets in train a new set of decisions.

*Oddlands* grew out of the Hive, AFF's workshop initiative that matches filmmakers with creative people from other art forms. Projects such as Rosemary Myers's *Girl Asleep* (Windmill Theatre) and Stephen Page's *Spear* (Bangarra Dance Theatre) have come out of the Hive.

Before taking part in the Hive, they'd already spoken to Tony Ayres from Matchbox Pictures, seeking preliminary advice about adapting their activities to the screen.

They went back to Matchbox with the idea of doing a half-hour TV work, and found immediate interest and support.

There was a learning curve, Gladwin says. "We've dabbled with making dance videos or performance-based videos for the company, but sitting down and writing a script was different."

The creative timeline was more structured, more tightly controlled. With a shorter work, they had to narrow the focus so the emphasis fell on two performers rather than the ensemble as a whole.

Back to Back works with guest actors, so some cast members came from outside the group.

Working with Matchbox, Gladwin says, they learned a lot. "Their knowledge of the company was really solid and that was incredibly helpful. I think they were very open to an alternative writing process and the actors' input. And they had a genuine interest in the actors' contribution to capturing that performative moment."

Laherty had some previous screen experience. He was in Matthew Saville's 2007 crime drama *Noise* as a young man who regularly visits a police caravan set up to investigate a murder. Saville cast Laherty after seeing him in a Back to Back show.

Laherty loved doing *Noise*, he says, and it gave him some familiarity with the mechanics of a film set going into *Oddlands*. "I knew most of what they do, but one new thing was the stuntman. I'd never seen that before."

*Oddlands.*

The ensemble is accustomed to long days in the theatre, but filming outdoors in the cold was a new and demanding experience. "I'd do it again," Laherty says. "But I think the other people who weren't in it as much should get a bigger chance next time."

Teuben embraced performing in front of the camera. "I picked up pretty quickly what had to happen to make a film. I adapted to each day differently."

It took her a while to find her character, she says, "to figure out who she was and where she came from". But there was something about the construction of a film performance, starting each day afresh and leaving the previous day's work behind, that appealed to her. She puts a lot of herself into theatre roles, she says, and it takes its toll on her. Making a short film, "letting go was much easier".

Right now, Back to Back is working on new project, *The Shadow Whose Prey the Hunter Becomes*, which is in development. It grew out of a suggestion from a company board member who brought Gladwin a *New York Times* article and a short documentary about a group of men living in a small Iowa town.

There were several dozen, all with intellectual disabilities: during the course of almost 30 years they had worked in a food processing plant and lived in harsh, restrictive conditions. Residents of the small town of Atalissa, where they lived, had no idea of what was happening in their midst.

"Increasingly neglected and abused, the men remained in heartland servitude for most of their adult lives," the *Times* says. When their situation was finally revealed, their court case became a key moment in disability rights.

Back to Back is exploring this situation and its implications. It's not just about the exploitation of employees, Gladwin says, it's also about the place in which they worked: a massive food processing plant in which turkeys are bred purely to be killed and eaten.

"It's a story that looks at animal rights, human rights and the future we're heading towards," Gladwin says. "It's looking back and looking forward."

In the course of a day at Back to Back, ideas for the work are developed by Gladwin and the ensemble. There are questions for discussion and exercises and improvisation to build on what is being talked about. Everyone's experiences and interests come into play: this could be a childhood recollection of distress, a concern about the depiction of violence or a fascination with the idea of artificial intelligence. All these elements are likely to contribute in some way to the final production.

There's plenty ahead for Back to Back, including a Hong Kong performance next month and a trip to the London International Festival of Theatre next June. Gladwin would like to see more come out of *Oddlands*, perhaps a series of connected works, exploring its themes and drawing on other members of the ensemble.

A successful theatre season with a sold-out run may be seen by a few thousand people: a TV show can reach hundreds of thousands. There's also something appealing, Gladwin says, about being discovered in a new way by audiences.

"People who come to see our shows, even if they haven't seen us before, come with an understanding or a set of descriptors of who we are," Gladwin says.