

That sinking feeling

One month after Melbourne's RISING was forced to close after only a single night of performances, Tim Byrne reflects on the festival's impact and a sector in crisis.



Lucy Guerin Inc's *Pendulum* opened for one night only before RISING and Melbourne as a whole were placed back into lockdown. Photo credit: Gregory Lorenzutti.

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So Melbourne is out of lockdown and everything can return to normal, right? For lovers of the performing arts, who've been informed that theatres can't open with more than 75 people indoors, it's more a case of 'not so fast'. For the actual artists themselves – the theatre makers, the performers, the musicians, front-of-house and technical support staff – it feels more like catastrophic collapse.

The inaugural RISING Festival was cancelled after a single day, the majority of its shows likely gone for good. All theatre is transitory, a kind of momentary haunting, but this 'insubstantial pageant faded' was a particularly cruel felling of the city's already bruised artistic spirit.

The last time I went to the theatre was that opening night of RISING (doesn't that now feel like a cruelly ironic title?) and the shows I saw have been rattling around

my mind ever since, like the ghost of Jacob Marley. Theatre responds in different ways to its geographic and temporal context, but all the theatre I saw that night feels fringed by grief and shock, the artistic intent washed away by the tidal wave of a singular merciless global event. Melbourne has been here before, of course, but this time it feels personal.

I saw acclaimed choreographer Lucy Guerin's *Pendulum*, where seven identically-clad female dancers interacted with a series of pendulum lights that hung from the ceiling, lifting and swinging them, pushing them back and forth in gentle, repetitive ululations. Harriet Oxley's gold lamé costumes evoked the retro-futurism of 1970s' Russian sci-fi cinema, even as Guerin's strangely constricted choreography stripped the dancers of all individuality. Perhaps the formlessness, the very lack of personalised, autonomous movement, was itself a statement of artistry. Could those women have been ancient gods in the mode of the Moiri, moving lights around like spheres of influence, indifferent to human suffering but not maliciously provoking it either?

The extraordinary Geelong-based Back to Back Theatre – made up of artists with perceived physical and intellectual disabilities – presented *Food Court*, the first in a triptych retrospective that was to include *Small Metal Objects* and *Ganesh vs the Third Reich*. This was one of the bleakest of all their shows, an excoriating exploration of bullying, othering and brutality. A group of girls ganged up on another, mocking her body, her abilities, her very worth as a human being. And then they violated her in ways that recalled the systemic violence committed against people with perceived intellectual disability throughout history, stripping her of clothing, of support and dignity. Eventually, they bashed her and left her for dead in a wood. It was the sort of deeply felt and intellectually dazzling work that has come to define this company, and I can't stop thinking about it.



Back to Back Theatre's 'deeply felt and intellectually dazzling' *Food Court*. Photo credit: Francis Loney.

The final show of the night took place as the full moon turned red, in an office block on a tiny CBD laneway I'd never been down, despite a whole life lived in this city. Roslyn Oades' *The Nightline* was probably the one show most attuned to its time and place, the piece that directly – and quite literally – plugged into Melbourne's liminal mood. A series of short confessions or outreaches recorded anonymously by Melburnian night owls between the hours of midnight and 6am, the performance was individually accessed via old-fashioned phones with handheld receivers and separate lines one could plug in and out of at will.

There was a struggling international student, a grizzled truck driver, a woman who worried about her vicious cycle of drinking, a sanguine nonagenarian. They spoke to us through these phones and it was like Melbourne in lockdown whispering in my ear, polyphonous but also deeply personal and pleading.

Oades' superb command of dramatic structure, aided immeasurably by Bob Scott's brilliant sound design, meant that the calls could build and coalesce around ideas. A storm broke and the callers talked about rain, or the morning approached and birdsong burst through. It was an utterly unique intersection of the private and the

shared, a call to the city to persevere, to check in on one another, to connect. I remember thinking: I must come again.

All of it shut down now, not to mention the other 130-odd shows that were cancelled before they could even open. And still the devastation continues, with myriad performances across the city – from the sharply relevant MTC comedy *Lifespan of a Fact*, to the grandiose magnificence of Australian Ballet's *Anna Karenina* – that have had to postpone or close early.

So while Victoria might be celebrating a return to some normalcy, it might also spare a thought for an industry still in crisis, for the sea of theatres across the city that remain empty, with just their ghost lights on. If hope, as Emily Dickinson has it, is the thing with feathers, it's certainly yet to spread its wings for the performing arts in Melbourne.