

Anthea Williams:

Hi, this is Anthea Williams and welcome to Activated Arts. Over the past 30 years, Back to Back has been one of Australia's most successful and awarded theater companies. They have traveled across the globe and been in festivals in the USA, Europe, Asia, and beyond. The company says they question the assumptions about what is possible in theater, but also the assumptions we hold about ourselves and others.

Anthea Williams:

Today, I'm speaking with Simon Laherty and Ingrid Voorendt. Simon is an ensemble member who has been working with Back to Back since 1999. He's made an enormous contribution to the company. Simon was co-deviser and performer in the company's shows, Ganesh and the Third Reich and Lady Eats Apples, and co-writer and performer in The Shadow Whose Prey the Hunter Becomes.

Anthea Williams:

He also co-starred in Back to Back's first foray into film, Odd Lands, which won the audience award for best short film at the Adelaide Film Festival. Simon also plays Steve in Small Metal Objects, which we'll talk about later in the show as it's about to have a season at the Adelaide Festival.

Anthea Williams:

Ingrid is an artistic associate at Back to Back. Look, I think I also have to say to both of my guests, and to the audience, that I'm a massive fan of Back to Back. I've been seeing Back to Back's work since 2003, when, freshly graduated from VCA and very excited about theater, I saw Soft at the Melbourne Festival and my mind was blown. I just thought it was wonderful and I've seen a lot of Back to Back's work since then.

Anthea Williams:

I'm thrilled you've agreed to come on Zoom, despite the lockdown, and have a chat with me. Simon and Ingrid, thank you both for joining me.

Simon Laherty:

Hello.

Ingrid Voorendt:

Thank you.

Anthea Williams:

Great. So, Simon, you're an ensemble member, so I'm going to start with you. Why do you think Back to Back has been so successful for so long?

Simon Laherty:

We're all artists and with a disability, but it doesn't change us we're still working, we still love to act in tours, and just love doing the work.

Anthea Williams:

I think that's fair. I feel like when I was told I was going to be interviewing you, I thought, Oh, great. Simon. I know Simon. Because I've seen so much of the work that I felt like I already knew you. Do you think that's true? Do you think your audience has a sense of who you were as an individual from having seen the work over the years?

Simon Laherty:

I'd say yes.

Anthea Williams:

That's really lovely to hear. I feel a little bit bad. I feel a little bit like I've read through your diary and you haven't had a chance to read through mine.

Simon Laherty:

That's all right.

Anthea Williams:

I guess you did put your diary out in public, so that's fair. And I think the real people aspect of Back to Back is really important. I know you're part of the ensemble and you've been part of the ensemble for about 20 years. How did you get into the ensemble?

Simon Laherty:

I started with the company in 2003, but before that I was with a another [inaudible 00:03:03] called the Theater of Speed [inaudible 00:03:03] on Wednesdays. So I was there for like two or three years [inaudible 00:03:10] Back to Back, they needed an actor, so I came in and [inaudible 00:03:17] later.

Anthea Williams:

Awesome. And how does it work? Is it like a nine to five job?

Simon Laherty:

It's from 9:30 to 3:30 [inaudible 00:03:28].

Anthea Williams:

What does each day look like? So you turn up at 9:00 or 9:30, and how do you start?

Simon Laherty:

There's a meeting on Monday morning, then we'll do a bit of work, short break, more work, lunch break, more work, go home.

Anthea Williams:

What is the work like? As a theater director, I feel like you usually start with a vocal warmup and a physical warmup. Does your day start in a similar way?

Simon Laherty:

The way it is, go into the studio and we do improvs or rehearse [inaudible 00:04:07] work on.

Anthea Williams:

Does most of your theater get made from improvisations?

Simon Laherty:

Most of it does.

Anthea Williams:

On the website, there's this great quote that you have, that the website talks about how there's an ongoing conversation with the company that you're having with the audience and how the stories that you tell are personal, but they're also political and they're also cosmic. How do you decide as an ensemble what you're going to make your theater about?

Simon Laherty:

Well, we talk with Bruce and he gets us to do improv of what he thinks will be important to do, so we do that. And then he sort of makes the final decision [inaudible 00:04:50] to a script, and it will change a few times over to see how it goes.

Anthea Williams:

How long does it generally take to make a show?

Simon Laherty:

About three years at most.

Anthea Williams:

Wow. Okay. But I'm assuming that also gets cut up with time when you're going and touring your other work, because you've got a pretty hefty touring schedule.

Simon Laherty:

We do.

Anthea Williams:

Is every day in rehearsal with Bruce or are there a lot of other artists who come in as well?

Simon Laherty:

It depends on the sort of show you're just wanting to make. [inaudible 00:05:29].

Anthea Williams:

Great. Thank you. And Ingrid, I know that you are an associate artist at Back to Back. What does your job involve?

Ingrid Voorendt:

Lots more things.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, I bet.

Ingrid Voorendt:

I work a lot with Theater of Speed, who Simon mentioned earlier, we work on Wednesdays. Theater of Speed is a kind of experimental community laboratory, and that's also a sort of point of intersection between Back to Back and lots and lots of different artists making work in really different ways, and it's often where new ideas might begin to form. Would you agree, Simon?

Simon Laherty:

Yeah, generally.

Ingrid Voorendt:

I also get to work on other community projects, like at the moment we're planning a really big online workshop festival called Camp International that's happening in March. And we have guest artists from around Australia and around the world who are running workshops as part of that, which is really exciting.

Ingrid Voorendt:

I get to work with the ensemble in all sorts of different ways. And this morning we were having a conversation about the next new work, and when you asked that question of Simon around where do you get your ideas from, I was thinking, Simon, about how much time you've given to those conversations and there's space given to each ensemble member to contribute, so that decisions around the kind of work that's created are allowed to evolve really organically and in their own time, if that makes sense. Would you agree, Simon?

Simon Laherty:

Yeah, generally.

Ingrid Voorendt:

Do you think it takes a while for it to be clear what the show is that's going to be [crosstalk 00:07:04]?

Simon Laherty:

It does.

Ingrid Voorendt:

Being an artistic associate, and there's two of us, there's Tamara Searle and me, we get to do so many different things and work with so many different people and witness so many amazing, amazing things in rehearsal and in workshops. It's a great role. I really enjoy it.

Anthea Williams:

Theater of Speed has been running as a side project to the ensemble or what would you call it? The outreach arm or is it an experiment? How would you define that?

Ingrid Voorendt:

What do you think, Simon?

Simon Laherty:

It's been [inaudible 00:07:37] since 1999, which is all the way when I first started with them, but then a couple years break. It's just too easy. I just wanted to go [inaudible 00:07:48] acting career.

Ingrid Voorendt:

The ensemble is more demanding in some ways than Theater of Speed, isn't it Simon? It's a really different commitment. But back to your question, I think Theater of Speed is all those things. It's an experiment and it's an intersection for different people to meet and work together. It's kind of a training ground in a way as well.

Anthea Williams:

Wonderful. And you said that you get a lot of ideas from Theater of Speed as well. That's exciting. So you have a lot of people who are putting ideas and energy into the company and the work that Back to Back makes.

Simon Laherty:

Yep.

Anthea Williams:

All right, look, it's really exciting to hear about how the work is made. Three years to make a show. I am so jealous. But I also know that devising takes a really long time, so I'm not surprised. And I know that over those three years, you'll be busy making a lot of other work. Simon, do you enjoy touring around the world with the shows?

Simon Laherty:

Yeah, I do.

Anthea Williams:

Do you find that audiences from other countries can have radically different responses to Australian audiences or are they quite similar?

Simon Laherty:

It depends what language they speak over there.

Anthea Williams:

Right. So say, for instance, if you were in somewhere like New York or London, they might have quite a similar response to people in Australia?

Simon Laherty:

Yeah, definitely.

Anthea Williams:

How has it been when you've gone to non-English-speaking countries? I know that you've been to Hong Kong and Vienna. How has it gone in countries like that?

Simon Laherty:

[inaudible 00:09:20] the people that speak German. [inaudible 00:09:22] can't understand.

Anthea Williams:

Right. How did Ganesh Versus the Third Reich go in Germany?

Simon Laherty:

They loved it.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah? Why did they love it? [crosstalk 00:09:32].

Simon Laherty:

They thought it was just really interesting. [inaudible 00:09:38] swastika [inaudible 00:09:42].

Anthea Williams:

I'm not surprised I loved it. I think it's a remarkable show as well. So when you say that you make each show by improvising, I'm assuming to begin with you have a really broad slate of what you think the work might be about. Is that right?

Simon Laherty:

Yes.

Anthea Williams:

Then will Bruce set up a situation or will the ensemble members suggest a situation that you might improvise around?

Simon Laherty:

That's Bruce's position.

Anthea Williams:

Great. You have a quote on the website which I just love, as a director it made me laugh because I think some people would say something similar about me. You said he's hard on actors. Why do you say that?

Simon Laherty:

He's very hard on us sometimes.

Anthea Williams:

In what ways?

Simon Laherty:

Well, [inaudible 00:10:30] he goes, "This doesn't work, let's do it this other way. No, go this other way. No, go this way. No, go this way again." He keeps changing his mind which way he wants us to go.

Anthea Williams:

Do you like that, or do you think it wastes time?

Simon Laherty:

Wastes time.

Anthea Williams:

I had an actor say to me just last week, "I wish you could make up your mind." I think the thing is we get inspired by you guys and we want to try out every possible permutation. What happens when you disagree with him?

Simon Laherty:

[inaudible 00:10:59] disagree with him and say, "Come on, Bruce, make up your mind. You're changing your mind all the time."

Anthea Williams:

How many people are in the ensemble currently?

Simon Laherty:

There's four in this stage. Three guys and one girl.

Anthea Williams:

Can you tell me a little bit about the work you're making next, or is it too early to talk about it?

Simon Laherty:

Well, we all do our own little projects. Mine's verses from my favorite singer, Britney Spears.

Anthea Williams:

Oh, fantastic. Have you heard about the documentary Reframe Britney?

Simon Laherty:

I saw a bit of it.

Anthea Williams:

You've seen it? I thought you couldn't get it an Australia. I'm really pleased you've seen it.

Simon Laherty:

I've seen just a preview of it.

Anthea Williams:

Great. Well I hope you get a chance to see it. I know it's available on Hulu in America, you might. I don't know. I don't have any context to help you see it, but I think you've got to get onto that. Will you all sit projects around ideas to start bringing together ideas into the rehearsal room?

Simon Laherty:

Kind of.

Anthea Williams:

Can you tell me a bit more about that?

Simon Laherty:

[inaudible 00:12:05] but mine's going to be like a four stage play, four acts in one play. [inaudible 00:12:17] prose, music, singing, dancing.

Ingrid Voorendt:

Leotards. Aren't they going to [crosstalk 00:12:22]?

Anthea Williams:

Excellent. You say on the website that everyone is an actor, everyone can be an actor. Do you think that's true?

Simon Laherty:

Yeah.

Anthea Williams:

Why? Why do you think that?

Simon Laherty:

Everyone's got a talent. Everybody can be an actor if they want to.

Anthea Williams:

Do you think that's because everyone's got stories to tell?

Simon Laherty:

Yes.

Anthea Williams:

What are the stories that you're most passionate in telling?

Simon Laherty:

Well, [inaudible 00:12:46] SMO, that's probably the one I can relate to the most, because that was actually based on some of mu childhood.

Anthea Williams:

You said the show, Slow?

Ingrid Voorendt:

I'm going to say it's Small Metal Objects. SMO is Back to Back shorthand for Small Metal Objects.

Anthea Williams:

Okay, so you said your favorite show is Small Metal Objects because it's partly based on your childhood.

Simon Laherty:

Yep.

Anthea Williams:

Great. I watched the video of that last night. Unfortunately, I've never seen it. I've never been in the same place where it's on, but it's a show that people rave about. Because we'll have some people who will listen to this radio show who won't have seen Small Metal Objects, can you tell the audience a little bit about that?

Simon Laherty:

It's about two friends, Davey and Steve are the characters' names, and they're involved in a drug deal that doesn't actually go through. Because in the show the slogan is, friendship is more [inaudible 00:13:42] than money. Friendship was everything. A deal is a deal, but friendship is forever.

Anthea Williams:

It's really beautiful in the show. Your character is there with a really good friend and I think sometimes there are assumptions that get made about a drug deal where you would just assume that the people who are making the drug deal would be mercenary, but actually your friend in it is really kind, isn't he?

Simon Laherty:

It's actually a girl playing the character.

Anthea Williams:

Oh, sorry. So your friend is really kind, isn't she?

Simon Laherty:

She is.

Anthea Williams:

Then there are two other actors in the show. Can you tell us a little bit about them?

Simon Laherty:

Which show is it again?

Anthea Williams:

Small Metal Objects.

Simon Laherty:

Okay, well, the two people with the drug [inaudible 00:14:28] characters. Alan is a lawyer and [Jerva 00:14:33] is a psychologist.

Anthea Williams:

They're quite surprising as well. They don't really act the way that you would think a psychiatrist and a lawyer would act, do they?

Simon Laherty:

That's right.

Anthea Williams:

That show was first made in 2005, and it's about to go on at the Adelaide Festival, isn't it?

Simon Laherty:

Yeah.

Anthea Williams:

I think it's true when you say that people were really like Back to Back shows because of real people. And I didn't know that the show in part was based on parts of your life, but it comes across as very real, and I certainly had been told before I saw it that it was an amazing show that I needed to watch.

Anthea Williams:

It gets to the point in that show where your character doesn't want to leave the spot where he's standing, because he's trying to work out some really big things in his life. Can you tell us a little bit about what it is that he's trying to work on in his life at the time?

Simon Laherty:

He's trying to find out what's going to happen in his life if this is going.

Anthea Williams:

Gary makes it pretty clear that that's not going to happen, I think.

Simon Laherty:

That's right.

Anthea Williams:

It's a really heartwarming show. Ingrid, do you have anything you want to add for Adelaide audiences about Small Metal Objects?

Ingrid Voorendt:

I'm just thinking about the image in my head, or the energy in my head, is Simon, who I think stands still for around 20 minutes without moving. Is it that long, Simon? It's a long time that you stand still.

Simon Laherty:

20 minutes at least.

Ingrid Voorendt:

And because the backdrop of the work is the natural movement of the city, of a crowded space, this show has been performed all over the world in lots of different crowded spaces, in my mind, my image is Simon standing still and then this incredible movement of crowds and people passing him, and this idea about life moving on and moving past you while you stand there.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, it's true. I couldn't help thinking while I was watching it that there's all these interactions that you're hearing. And I should say the audiences are wearing headphones. The video I saw it was in Flinders Street Station in Melbourne, but you're getting to hear this conversation that you wouldn't usually get to hear because it's just happening at low volume between people who are intimate friends, and because you're also watching all these people walking through the station, and at one point there was a school girl and she seems to meet her mother and walk in a different direction, and there's friends and there's business people and children and adults, and it just makes you so aware of how much is going on in every person's mind at every point. At the same time, Simon's character, Steve, has got this whole whirlwind inside of him and he's trying to make some really big decisions about his life. And it's really beautiful.

Anthea Williams:

Visual elements are often a really large part of Back to Back's work, and Bruce is clearly a wonderful designer, as are all the people who work on the visuals at Back to Back. Simon, can you tell me a little bit about how that the visual language comes about in each of the plays that are made?

Simon Laherty:

That's when we get a costume designer in. [inaudible 00:17:44] think we should wear for the actors in the show.

Anthea Williams:

One time you wore a Hitler costume. How did you feel about that?

Simon Laherty:

Hitler costume, well, that was kind of outrageous, but enjoyed wearing it though.

Anthea Williams:

You enjoyed wearing it?

Simon Laherty:

Yeah.

Anthea Williams:

Why did you enjoy wearing it?

Simon Laherty:

It was warm. It was cozy. It was comfortable to wear.

Anthea Williams:

I agree with all of those things, those things are so important. I also really liked you wearing it because Hitler had such awful eugenics projects and I live with a disability, you live with a disability, I think both of our lives would have been in danger during the Third Reich. So I loved seeing you in that costume. I loved you taking that on. I thought that was provocative and powerful.

Simon Laherty:

Thanks.

Anthea Williams:

What about you, Ingrid? How do you think the visual worlds are shaped in each of these works?

Ingrid Voorendt:

I'm thinking about how, and particularly maybe this is to do with how long the process is as well, that it's like a new form is discovered [crosstalk 00:18:51] the visual element. I mean, they're completely part of that form across the repertoire. You can see links between the shows in terms of the elements, but I feel like they're all really different as well because the visual element has evolved with a process that's very specific to that work and the people who are in that work and who are making that work and the conversation that's driving it, that there's a signature there that's varied, and the visual elements of each work are so particular to whatever the question is, or the idea.

Anthea Williams:

I think we should also say for the audience much as Small Metal Objects happens in a busy space, often the work happens in theaters. Everything else I'd seen that is made by Back to Back was very much in a theater with very bold design elements that were absolutely curated. And so of course, Small Metal Objects was curated, but it was just in a very different way.

Anthea Williams:

But often there's been very elaborate design elements as well, from Hitler costumes and people dressed up as Ganesh to set elements that might surround the entire audience. So it's often a visual and oral faced when you go to a Back to Back show, which is really exciting.

Anthea Williams:

I'll move the conversation on a little bit. On the website, it talks about the work being personal and political and cosmic. What's important to you, Simon. Why do you make the theater? Is it because you enjoy it, or is it because you've got something important political to say, or is it because you want to tell personal stories, or is it all of the above?

Simon Laherty:

All the above.

Anthea Williams:

I think there's something amazingly playful about the company, and it makes me think about the nature of life and how we're all living in our own universes, but we're also very responsible to each other. Ingrid, what do you think about the cosmic?

Ingrid Voorendt:

I love that there's space for these really big questions and questions that don't have easy answers. And then in Back to Back's work those questions are sitting next to something, like you say, that's really funny, or that's really specific to a particular person or character, or, again, reminding us that we're ordinary humans kind of navigating life on earth, but we are this life on earth, which is this huge cosmic situation that we're in, and that kind of interplay between our small interpersonal domestic lives and then this bigger picture of life, death, why we're here, all of that. Bringing all of that together is really exciting.

Ingrid Voorendt:

A conversation between two people, but then you throw something into the mix that doesn't seem to work with that necessarily. [crosstalk 00:21:30] things together and seeing what might happen when these two elements collide.

Anthea Williams:

That's exciting. I think the process by which you make work sounds really exciting and it's no wonder that the work that you ended up making is so full and emotional and intelligent. It's just really ripe, fabulous theater. I think that there's no surprise that Back to Back has been doing so well for 30 years. It's a remarkable theater company. Thank you both very much. I'm really grateful.

Anthea Williams:

Simon, as I said before, I felt like I already knew you because I've seen so many of your shows, so it's been lovely to chat to you today. And Ingrid, lovely to chat to you. It's always nice to chat to another VCA grad. Thank you both so much for your time.

Simon Laherty:

Thank you.

Ingrid Voorendt:

Thank you. It's lovely to talk with you. Thanks.

Anthea Williams:

This is Anthea Williams on 2RPH Radio with Activated Arts. You can find out more about Back to Back Theater at their website, backtobacktheater.com. Small Metal Objects will be at the Adelaide Festival from the 2nd until the 8th of March.

Anthea Williams:

Now I'm going to introduce a new member of the Activated Arts team. Each month, Hanna Cormick is going to join us for the What's On. People who have listened to episode four, Value Shift, will already know a lot about Hanna and her work. Hanna, can you quickly introduce yourself to the audience?

Hanna Cormick:

Hi, I am a [inaudible 00:22:58] performance artist and art curator, and most people probably know my recent work at last year's Sydney Festival, The Mermaid, or as one of the curators of the online festival, PLATFORM Live.

Anthea Williams:

Fantastic. So, Hanna, why were you a little bit surprised when I asked you to be the person who did What's On with me?

Hanna Cormick:

I don't get out much. I live with immunologic disability. I've been living in a positive, precious, safe room for the last five and a half years. The pandemic's opened up a lot of access to digital work, but otherwise my access is kind of limited to being let into galleries after hours in full protective gear or being invited into a socially distanced trigger free dress rehearsal. And that stuff is pretty rare.

Anthea Williams:

Look, I'm not going to lie. I had to convince Hanna that she was the right person to work with, but Hanna has always striked me as someone who is so on the cutting edge of what's happening with arts and what's happening in the disability community, and she's so often introducing me to interesting people and ideas, that I just wanted to have her as a person I got to speak to once a month. So I'm so thrilled you're joining me on this program, Hanna, and I personally think it's really important to have a perspective of people who have clear access issues.

Anthea Williams:

Of course we have audience members from all over the world. It doesn't matter what we recommend, if it's contained in a space, there are people who are not going to be able to see it. So, Hanna, what are you excited by seeing, or not seeing, this month?

Hanna Cormick:

I thought I'd tell you one thing that I could access and one thing that I couldn't, but I really wish I could. First is a new work by Restless Dance Theater that's premiering at Adelaide Festival. [crosstalk 00:24:38] it's running from February 26 to March 14, and it's performed in a bowling alley. And one of the ways they've described it is, how would you feel if gutter guards and ramps were installed and advanced to prevent any possibility of your failing to hit the pins? Well, the intentioned help that smothers potential growth is something people with disability encounter all too often. Denial of the dignity of risk is one of many things playfully explored in switching and intelligent new work. Dignity of risk. I loved that phrase a lot.

Anthea Williams:

It's really interesting, isn't it? Risk and development are so intrinsically linked. I also just think it sounds awesome that you get to go to a bowling alley, get some bowling shoes, maybe get some popcorn. And then it sounds like you're basically going to get to eavesdrop on the work.

Hanna Cormick:

It's really exciting seeing things in atypical spaces like that. Although there is access for people, it's wheelchair accessible, there's disabled parking, and guide dogs are allowed, and there is an [inaudible 00:25:39] interpreted performance on March 10th.

Hanna Cormick:

But a warning there is [haze 00:25:44] use, and also the blurb kind of indicates that there's likely use of food onstage and/or served to the audience, which from an access perspective they really should be explicitly highlighting this in the booking info in the same way the haze warning is.

Anthea Williams:

I think the other thing is I had a look through the Adelaide Festival program this year and it's a really exciting program. I'm so excited that Back to Back is there, Restless Theater, and a lot of other really great work, but it doesn't seem like there's any kind of digital access, which we've seen a lot from festivals like the Sydney Festival and a lot of the film festivals since the pandemic. What are your thoughts on that?

Hanna Cormick:

I'm really disappointed. Myself and the rest of the housebound community, we've been fearing this, that once things can start going back to in-person performance, that everyone will forget that we still want to be able to access stuff as well. Festivals and theater companies and venues really need to be thinking very seriously about keeping in touch with digital access and presenting things in a kind of hybrid format.

Anthea Williams:

I completely agree with you. I can't get to Adelaide this year, even if I could, I wouldn't be going in the middle of a pandemic with my immunity being what it is, even though I certainly can leave the house, but it just feels a little bit like going back to square one.

Anthea Williams:

I understand that arts organizations often get their funding from tourism organizations. In the case of the Adelaide Festival they get a lot of state funding and city of Adelaide funding, but that doesn't create access for everyone. And I think that's a real shame that they're forgetting that. And tell me, what is the thing that you can see?

Hanna Cormick:

Something that I was able to access is issue three of 1:1:INFINITY, which is co-published online by 3-ply and Liquid Architecture. And this issue is an audio described playlist of the gallery exhibition, Shift, Rotate, Reflect, which is a selection of works by Jen Bervin. And that's exhibited at University Galleries in Illinois.

Hanna Cormick:

This work is described by Melissa Johnson as quite a progressive style of ADs, very subjective sensorial experiences of the artworks and the conversational and intimate nature of the tracks create a relationship with the describer that is completely different to traditional AD. It's an entirely different power dynamic. It's like walking around a gallery with a friend. You get not just a more nuanced view of the artwork, but a sense of the spaciousness and the tranquility of being in the gallery. It's the whole luscious experience. And it's free at 3ply.net.

Anthea Williams:

We will put links to all of these artworks in the notes for the show. There will also be a transcript that will be available for this entire episode.

Anthea Williams:

Hanna, thanks so much for joining me. I look forward to hearing from you again next month.

Hanna Cormick:

Thanks for having me and I can't wait to chat then.