

**Back to Back Theatre's *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*: politics, representation and response** Helena Grehan (Australia)/ Peter Eckersall (Australia)/ Bruce Gladwin (Australia)/ Alice Nash (Australia)

This panel will consider the work of the Australian contemporary performance company Back to Back Theatre within the context of the conference theme of 'cultural articulations'. We will address the ways in which religious objections to 'Ganesh versus the Third Reich' were entwined with questions about the economic impact of these objections in attempts to censor and control the work.

The company's aim is to:

... create theatre to dissect the unspoken imaginings of society. Our theatre is an analysis of the biological, psychological and social dynamics that simultaneously unify and separate our audience. We want people to think about the strangeness of their own thoughts (Back To Back Theatre).

Back to Back is a full-time ensemble of artists with intellectual disabilities who are located in Geelong, Australia. They have a reputation for sophisticated and innovative work and their productions tour internationally.

Bringing together artists and scholars this panel will address the company's most recent work 'Ganesh versus the Third Reich'. We will focus specifically on the ways in which the work was caught up in a process of political (and religious) resistance by Hindu communities globally. These communities objected to the depiction of Lord Ganesh in the company's publicity material and in early descriptions of the work. The objections resulted in both criticisms of the play and of the company and calls for the work to be censored or banned. The criticisms emerged, for the most part, from people who had neither seen the show nor were aware of the work of Back to Back theatre.

The panel will discuss the devising process and context for the show, the political and cultural negotiation that took place in advance of the objections and those that occurred in order for the show to proceed. It will also present detailed analysis of the performance and critical and artistic responses to it.

The panel will be comprised of the following elements.

- A dialogue between Back to Back's Artistic Director Bruce Gladwin, the company's Executive Producer Alice Nash and scholars Peter Eckersall and Helena Grehan to explore important questions about 'cultural articulations' that pertain not only to 'Ganesh versus the Third Reich' but also to consider the conditions within which contemporary politically inflected performance is produced and received.
- Contributions by Eckersall and Grehan that will analyse both 'Ganesh versus the Third Reich' as well as responses to it. These papers will explore the tension between the rights of artists to express their ideas and the demands of increasingly conservative cultural, religious and political environments where funding, support and control are often inextricably enmeshed (abstracts for these two papers are included below).

***This paper will analyse the production 'Ganesh versus the Third Reich' in terms of the ethical, political and social questions the work engenders*** Helena Grehan, Murdoch University (Australia)

Advance publicity for Back to Back Theatre's 2011 production 'Ganesh versus the Third Reich' caused uproar in both the Australian and popular Indian press. A section of the Hindu community was outraged at what they saw as the misuse of Ganesh and a media frenzy ensued during which the company was called to explain its use of this important symbol in their work. Round table discussions were held during which the Company's Executive Producer Alice Nash was asked to account for the potential damage this work might do to the State's economy. These discussions took place before the show's opening night and nobody had yet seen the production.

Back to Back Theatre state that 'within Australian society people with disabilities continue to be placed in the category of "the other"' and that as a company that contains a 'core ensemble of artists with intellectual disabilities' it is 'uniquely placed to comment on the social, cultural, ethical and value-based structures that define the institution know as "the majority"'. In this regard then, 'Ganesh versus the Third Reich', is made up of two stories. The first is the story of Lord Ganesh's journey to Germany to reclaim the swastika from Adolf Hitler. The second explores the ways in which people with disabilities are treated. It is concerned with negotiating the ethical tensions that exist between representation and exploitation. This second story, according to Artistic Director Bruce Gladwin, 'is a fictionalised autobiography of the company'. This paper takes the theme 'cultural articulations' as its starting point for an examination of both the representation of Ganesh in the performance and the ways in which the two stories loop around one another in a process of exchange about the ethics of representation and judgement in and in response to this work.

**Theatre Love** Peter Eckersall, University of Melbourne,

In Back to Back's performance of 'Small Metal Objects' a man declines to transact a business deal because he values the feelings of a friend more than the opportunity for profit. In 'Ganesh versus the Third Reich', the all powerful Ganesh postpones his mythical journey into the terrors of Nazi Germany to save the life of a disabled Jew named Levi, who is imprisoned as an object of 'scientific' inquiry in a concentration camp. Contrasting these moments is an often-discussed scene in Back to Back's 'Food Court' where a terrible and violent crime is enacted by the multitude against the one. Terry Eagleton has written about fostering an awareness of the 'objectivity' of human relations in contemporary capitalist society, stating that a selfless openness to the needs of others ... is very close to love'.<sup>1</sup> Theatrical love is often depicted as being inherently subjective, private and conflicted but Eagleton calls for its rethinking in terms of a revolutionary discourse. Back to Back's theatre often draws us precisely into this possibility in moments that explore interpersonal relations as acts of selfless love.

In considering the broader situation of recent performances of 'Ganesh' such an idea of objectivity was not recognized by protestors; some sent emails containing violent threats to the theatre company, while others sought to have the performance banned outright. This paper asks what would it take for theatre to respond to such vexatious and predetermined forms of dissent? For Eagleton, this is not simply a matter of leaving forms of dissent unchallenged in an uneasy stasis (the protestors outside the box office, the audience and performers 'inside'). Rather, he writes that 'true judiciousness means taking sides.'<sup>2</sup> The paper considers some of the possible ways that reading Back to Back's theatre might respond to the current wave of a politics where opposition is an end in itself, whereas the idea of 'taking sides' requires a radical appreciation of the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, Basic Books, 2003, 131.

<sup>2</sup> Eagleton 136