

Wrecking Ball Action Hero

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Image: Action Hero

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Wed 31 May – Sat 3 June

7:30pm

65 mins

Warning: Contains strong language,
flashing lights & haze

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Creative Team

**Co-Artistic Director,
Writer & Performer:**

Gemma Paintin

**Co-Artistic Director,
Writer & Performer:**

James Stenhouse

Lighting Designer:

Jo Palmer

Dramaturg:

Deborah Pearson

Producer:

Mel Scaffold

Image: Paul Blakemore



Artist Statement

This might seem strange, considering we're theatre makers, but Action Hero are scared of theatre. We're afraid of 'plays'. When we began working together in 2005 our desire to make theatre came from an urge to disrupt and re-imagine the ways in which audiences, authors and performers meet in the moment of performance. It felt to us like the conventional ways of telling stories on stage could never address the problem of who gets to tell those stories, and whose stories we get to hear.

Our interest instead lay in collaborating with our audience rather than doing something for them, and so we have created performances for live audiences in every different kind of form imaginable: a DIY stunt show, an imagined western in a bar, a 6 hour-long argument to camera, a noise gig that goes wrong, a deconstructed underdog sports movie, a collective uncovering of a miniature city hidden underneath ash. All types of theatre, but never a play. Until now.

So *Wrecking Ball* is our first play. We have always used writing as part of a process, but this is the first time we set out intentionally to write a play. It's also the first time we've performed any of our work end-on; the stage is set up as it normally would be, without our usual re-configuration disrupting the relationship between the performer

and the audience. In *Wrecking Ball*, we're using the theatre space (mostly) in the way it's intended. We were searching for a form that would suit the content we were making, and it seemed right that it be a play. We like to think of *Wrecking Ball* as a site-specific piece for a theatre space.

In that sense, *Wrecking Ball* is about theatre. Or more accurately, it's about make-believe. It's about the seductive qualities of theatre, language and images. It's about the power dynamics that exist in any relationship (including the relationship between an audience and an artist), some of which we can see, some of which are hidden. It's about the power an artist holds and the ways in which well-meaning people might abuse that position of power unintentionally.

On the surface though, it's about a photographer taking a photo of a woman who is probably a celebrity. She wants to be young enough to be hot, but old enough to be old enough, and definitely not old. She wants to be reinvented, to be for real this time. She looks like every blonde you've ever seen, like the blonde gracing the giant billboard of your imagination, selling you whatever it is you want to believe in. The photographer seems familiar too, in his hipster uniform and with his casual friendliness. And so he begins to photograph her, to shape her and

to shape the world around her-and us- to make her into the image inside all our heads.

The photographer in *Wrecking Ball* is a stand-in for the creator of a play, be that a writer, artist or author. As he gradually builds a fiction so strong that she eventually has no choice but to play along, despite her misgivings, the play constructs and deconstructs fiction and reality in order to confuse the two so thoroughly that we don't fully know what we are looking at anymore: is that his real shirt? Is that her real cocktail? Are those real beers? The (fake) pineapple in *Wrecking Ball* is a stand-in for a multitude of images and ideas in the same way that actors are stand-ins for real people and in the same way that fiction stands-in for reality.

Perhaps it doesn't matter how real you are when you're inside a theatre; whatever you do will always be read as fiction. Even the characters in the play can't escape the inevitable slide back into make-believe.

We see the celebrity in *Wrecking Ball* stuck inside the script, all her attempts to subvert it inevitably appropriated by the author(s) in service of the fiction at the same time as we see any number of real life celebs attempting to show themselves to be different, real, hot, rebellious, new, sexy, reinvented, empowered by acting outside of their

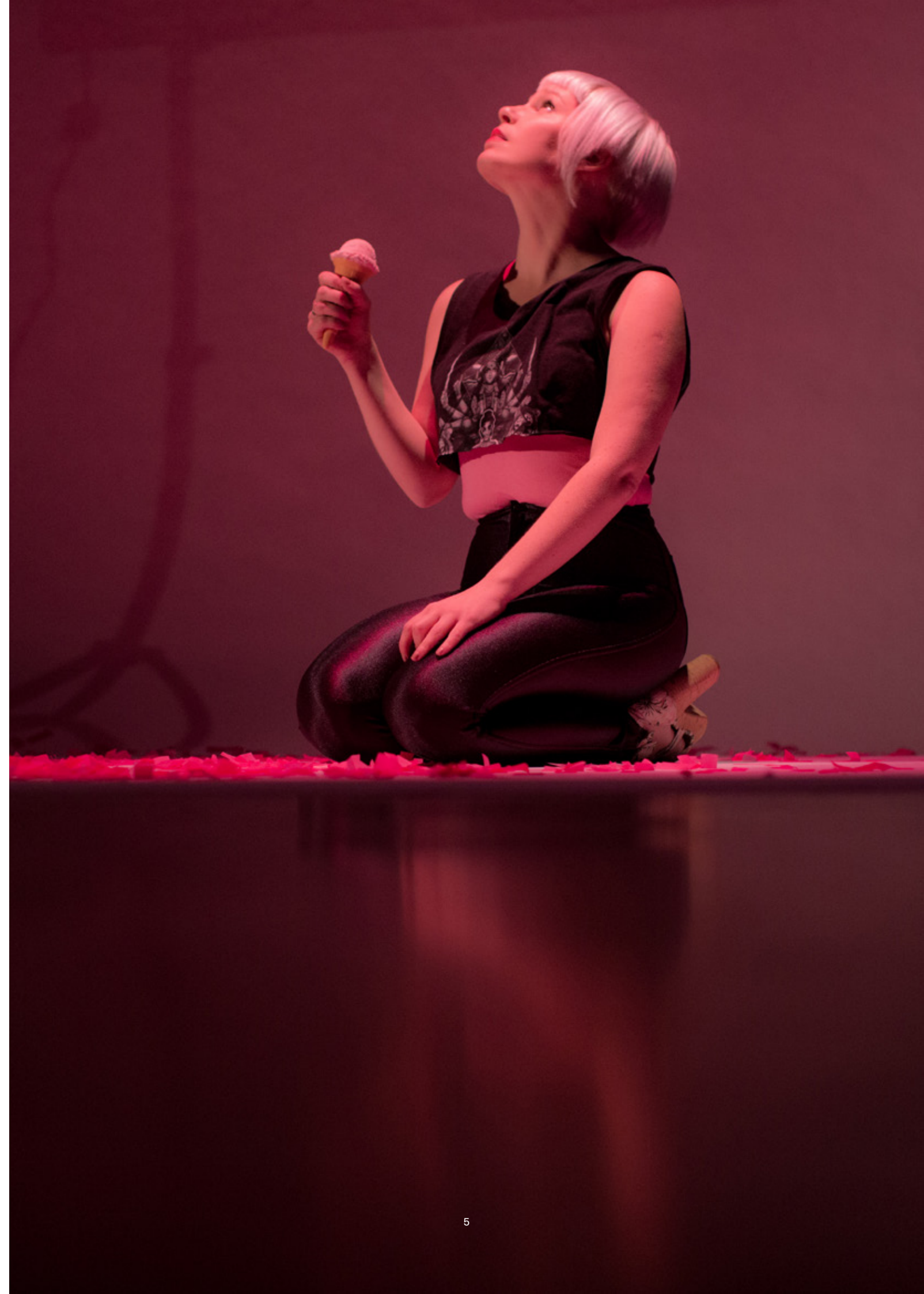
own scripts, only to find everything they do reincorporated into a narrative that is inescapable. Or maybe she knew that all along, and all this faux-rebellion is just a way to sell records, and the perfect picture is her weapon of choice.

The engineers of our destruction aren't necessarily going to be those who control the nuclear weapons. Perhaps it is more likely that they will be the ones in control of images and the way we 'see' things, of how ideas are communicated and repackaged in order to sell us stuff or tell us stories about how they think we and the world "should" be. Perhaps the assumed good in any act of creativity makes it all the more potent a weapon. Like the photographer in *Wrecking Ball* it can manipulate us, exploit us and abuse us, and then convince us it was all our idea in the first place.

What if the moment of creation is simultaneously the moment of destruction? What if images can wreck us while grinning innocently at us through the lens?

Wrecking Ball asks what is real, and whether the real really matters.

Image: Paul Blakemore



Gemma Paintin & James Stenhouse

Co-Artistic Directors & Performers

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Gemma Paintin and James Stenhouse live in Bristol, UK, and create interdisciplinary performances together under the name Action Hero. For more than a decade, they have worked almost exclusively with each other, and are committed to creating work together as part of a long form collaborative practice. Together they have toured to more than twenty five countries across 5 continents to critical and popular acclaim.

Their ongoing interests lie in the iconography of popular culture and its use; both as a weapon and as a shared cultural memory, and although their work manifests many different forms, the live experience is at the heart of everything they do.

Gemma & James won an Austin (Texas) Critic’s Table Award in 2013; in 2016 they were shortlisted for the Anti Festival International Prize for Live Art for their contribution to the field. A book of six of their works was recently published by Oberon and they are visiting lecturers Central School of Speech and Drama.

Jo Palmer

Lighting Designer

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Jo Palmer is a Freelance Production Manager and Technical Designer for Live performance and events. She has toured both nationally and internationally with numerous companies including Split Britches, Stacy Makishi and Action Hero. She was the Technical Designer for Makishi’s 2013 show, *The Falsettos*, as well as Split Britches’ *Desperate Archives* at the La Mama ETC Gallery in New York and The Library of Performing Rights at Encuentro 2014 in Montreal. More recently she has designed lighting for Jo Bannon’s *Alba* at IBT 2015 in Bristol, Stacy Makishi’s *VesperTime* and Project O’s *SWAGGA*. She works as a designer for Split Britches on a variety of their work including their latest show, *UXO*. She is currently designing on Le Gateaux Chocolat’s *Duckie*, Liz Carr’s *Assisted Suicide: The Musical* and *Latitude 36*, for Valletta Capital of Culture 2018.

Deborah Pearson

Dramaturg

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Deborah Pearson is a live artist and playwright. Her work has toured to four continents and fifteen countries, and has been translated into five languages. She recently published *The Future Show* with Oberon books. She is the founding co-director of UK artist collective Forest Fringe. Deborah has won awards for both her solo practice and her work with Forest Fringe, including three herald angels, a Scotsman Fringe First, a Peter Brooke Empty Space Award and the Total Theatre Award for Significant Contribution.

She has a PhD in narrative in contemporary performance from Royal Holloway, where she was a Reid Scholar. Her research was supervised by Dan Rebellato.

She is an associate artist with Volcano in Canada and is a resident artist at Somerset House Studios.

Mel Scaffold

Producer

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Mel Scaffold is CEO of Theatre Bristol, where she helps design and shape new ideas that make large-scale change in the arts, and develops relationships and partnerships that will bring new opportunities to the sector.

She previously worked as Theatre Bristol’s Company Producer, giving senior producing support to a number of artists including Action Hero.

Until 2015 she was also Development Facilitator for Create Gloucestershire, an organisation instigating change in the arts sector through collective thinking and working.

Previous incarnations include producing live art and dance at Arnolfini, spoken word at Apples & Snakes and new writing inspired by biomedical science at Theatrescience. She holds an MA in Performance Research and is Chair of Trustees for Firebird Theatre, a company of disabled actors.

Image: Paul Blakemore



Wrecking Ball is commissioned by the Spring Festivals Commission 2015: Sprint, Watch Out, Mayfest, Pulse and Latitude Festival. Seeded by greenhouse, A Farnham Maltings initiative, and developed with the support of the National Theatre Studio, The Point, Eastleigh and The West End Centre. Produced by Mel Scaffold, Theatre Bristol's Company Producer. Supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England.

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For more information, please contact us on the details below.

521 Queensberry Street
North Melbourne VIC 3051
(03) 9322 3720

artshouse@melbourne.vic.gov.au
artshouse.com.au

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(03) 9322 3713

Arts House acknowledges the traditional land upon which we are located, of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin nation, and pay our respect to Elders both past and present and, through them, to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

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