

the music

Melbourne / Free / Incorporating *insiders*

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ALL THE CITY'S A STAGE

melbourne festival



All The City's A Stage

A Welcome From Melbourne Festival
Director **Jonathan Holloway**.

We need to talk about Seventeen. Actually, scratch that... we need to change the subject, take a break, indulge in some rejuvenating joy, and get some perspective.

Welcome to Melbourne Festival 2017. When we confirmed the program back in June, we wanted to create a month of the most exciting collaborations, most fiercely burning talent, and experiences to help us remember how amazing we can be when we really put our minds to it. We wanted to pull back for a wide shot, see the whole picture. We all feel even more committed to this three months later.



That is what inspired us. In the first *Magnetic Fields* visit for a decade, Stephin Merritt and the band perform 50 of his songs, one for each year of his life, 25 per night over two nights, in an Australian exclusive. Don't feel left out though — your own birthday can be the star of the show in the brilliant and immersive theatre party that is *All My Friends Were There*. I'd tell you more, but then I'd have to kill you (and that would screw up 2017 good and proper).

First breathy words lead (as always) to the complete destruction of the stage and an electro-music-theatre finale in the performance hurricane that is *Geminal*, before a wider lens yet trumps the whole thing, and the cinematic genius of Terrence Malik's *Voyage Of Time* is shown with a 100-piece live orchestra, charting the

universe from Big Bang to Kim Jong-un. A good programming maxim is "Don't F*** It Up For The Kids", and the gloriously gothic refractory experience that is *House Of Mirrors* will walk the line, dividing fairground attraction and Lynchian dystopia.

Almost all "do you remember where you were when...?" moments come out of the blue, but I can say now, without any doubt, that in 20 years time the subject of this in Australia will be Taylor Mac's *24-Decade History Of Popular Music*. It's long, like Glastonbury is long. It's all-consuming and constantly surprising, like that amazing New Year's Eve party you never went to. Taylor Mac sings 246 great songs over four nights with a delivery that swings from Bowie to Franklin (Aretha, not Benjamin), backed by a big band from New Orleans, Detroit and New York City. The show has more drama than *Game Of Thrones*, and is the perfect series of binge watches. All that, plus you get to hang with 800 incredibly attractive people in the Forum,

and re-enact the American Civil War by throwing 4,000 ping pong balls at each other. If you can't meet the love of your year and get laid after that, we just can't help you.

The resulting time-crunch after so many long (loooong) shows means we need to simultaneously see our favourite titans of music (Jamie xx), visual art (Olafur Eliasson) and dance (Wayne McGregor) all at the same time, in the blistering phenomenon that is *Tree Of Codes*.

Finally, don't be a sook, come to our 19th-century North African takeover of the Forum as our *Festival Lounge*, open every night until late (Melbourne late, not Sydney late).

We want to give you a whole head-full of new memories, 19 days of different unforgettable experiences, a new 2017. Enjoy your international arts festival: go early, go hard and go often, indulge in what you love and discover some things that you don't.

November is for sleeping, October is for heroes.

I'll see you there.

Max Watt's

HOUSE OF MUSIC

(Literally, The Hi-Fi Kit)

SAT 30 SEP
CALIGULA'S HORSE

TUE 10 OCT
NAPALM DEATH,
BRUJERIA, LOCKUP
& BLACK RHENO

FRI 13 OCT
(GLAM SLAM)
APPETITE FOR
DESTRUCTION /
POISON 'US

SAT 14 OCT
SHOCKONE

SAT 21 OCT
JOEYBOY &
GANCORE CLUB

FRI 27 OCT - SOLD OUT
MAMMAL

SAT 28 OCT
THE ULTIMATE
MICHAEL JACKSON
EXPERIENCE

THU 02 NOV
WINTERSUN

FRI 03 NOV
THE RED EYES
15 YEAR REUNION SHOW

SAT 04 NOV
BILLY DAVIS &
THE GOOD LORDS
WED 08 NOV - SOLD OUT
THE MELVINS

FRI 10 NOV
MONO

SAT 18 NOV
GZA - THE GENIUS
USA - (of Wu Tang Clan)

TUE 21 NOV
PERTURBATOR

FRI 24 NOV
MISS MAY I
"THE SHADOW INSIDE" AUSTRALIAN TOUR

SAT 25 NOV
BABY ANIMALS

SUN 26 NOV
BLACKBEAR

FRI 01 DEC
NAI PALM

SAT 03 DEC
THE HARD ROCK SHOW
EXTRAVAGANZA
with special guests
ELECTRIC HEARTY & TERAMALE

SUN 31 DEC
- NEW YEARS EVE -
FRENZAL RHOMB
& THE BENNIES

SAT 20 JAN - SOLD OUT
SLEEP
USA

FRI 16 FEB
PRLJAVO KAZALISTE

SAT 03 MAR
BICEP
(USA)

FRI 09 MAR
POP WILL EAT ITSELF
UK

JIM BOB
(CARTER USA)
UK

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Taylor Made

WHAT

A 24-Decade History Of Popular Music

WHEN & WHERE

11, 13, 18 & 20 Oct, Forum Theatre

American drag icon **Taylor Mac** is liberating the unheard stories of our queer communities from two and half centuries of Western pop-culture. Queer Aussie chanteuse **Mama Alto** joins the ranks of the Dandy Minions. Cover image and feature pic by **Little Fang**.

Queer is not just an identity, it's a verb. Taylor Mac, performance artist, LGBTIQ+ icon and activist, lives and breathes queering as a verb: as an action, as a process, and as a subversion. Mac's very choice of pronoun — not he, not she, not they, but *judy* — indicates the camp self-awareness and subversive undermining of social constrictions lying at the heart of the queering process.

To queer something is to radically reinterpret existing materials, to shift the focal gaze, to measure by a different framework, to view through a different lens. It rejects the dominant, mainstream, normalised and supposedly objective understanding of the world and approaches it instead through self-aware subjectivity, from the margins into the centre, from the grassroots upwards, and with a freedom born of pluralities and multiple layers of meaning and connotation. And *Judy's* magnum opus, the *24-Decade History Of Popular Music*, does precisely that.

Acknowledging explicitly that popular culture, music, and indeed, Western society itself, has been built by and from the margins, Mac puts those margins back into the centre of a historical record which too often erases, silences or ignores them. Sexuality, race, gender, class and more collide with the myth of the mainstream through the vehicle of an archive of popular song transformed and reinterpreted in a "radical faerie realism ritual." It is not so much the re-writing of history as the revelation of elements that have been there, hidden, all along.

The ritual element is partly tied to the extravagant costumes, the flamboyant reimagining of songs, and the nature of a collective and participatory audience experience, but one of the keys to the success of this work is its durational nature. Twenty-four decades are re-enacted and re-envisioned over 24-hours, in a unique,



marathon experience of sustained communal focus. While the performance is now divided into four chapters of six hours, performed on separate days, as it will be in Melbourne, it has been staged once in a single continuous, non-stop, delicious day and night. But even in its four-part form, such an epic work of temporal and visual excess is a transformative and ecstatic experience.

For that very reason, many critics have compared Mac's *24-Decades* to Wagnerian opera, anointing it as "a Ring Cycle for the 21st century." And the comparison is pertinent not only for the piece's epic form but also for its mythological nature. Mac puts forth a fabulous, maximalist and expansive vision of divine queerness: a reverent and holy reliquary that bestows sainthood upon the marginalised of society and history. In this alternative understanding of our world and culture, judy allows queer people to rise to recognition as the central divinities and creative forces of our own mythical beginnings — no longer the minor roles in a history of white heterosexual men.

Thematically that's certainly true, and these values are embedded in the very fabric of the performance. While Taylor Mac is very much the auteur of this work, judy is not presenting a one-person show: *24-Decades* features a cast of over a hundred. The core members of Mac's sublime orchestra, the central figures of judy's supporting cast, and the costume team headed by the iconic Machine Dazzle, travel with Taylor from the United States. The rest of the performers are magnificent locals sourced through an artist call and extensive word-of-mouth endeavour by the Melbourne Festival and *24-Decades* teams. The Melbournian contingent includes a spectacular menagerie of burlesque dancers, marching bands, choral singers, classical musicians, and a crew of multidisciplinary

"
We are here in service to the Spirit of Dandy, in the belief that art and truth can heal.
"

performance artists who fulfil the role of Dandy Minions.

And that's where I come in. The Melbourne coterie of Dandy Minions includes some of our underground stars of cabaret, circus, burlesque, and drag, including the smoky Agent Cleave, the subversive Creatrix Tiara, the raucous

Dandrogyny, Australian drag icon Karen from Finance, and the stars of *Yummy* — including James Welsby, Beni Lola and Rolly — among many others.

What, you might ask, is a Dandy Minion? In the words of Timothy White Eagle, a First Nations American who is the leader of Taylor Mac's merry cohort, "We are here in service to the Spirit of Dandy — in the belief that art and truth can heal." In their words, it is about being a bridge to the audience, about opening hearts, about twinkling eyes and the role of human connection within epic artworks. The Dandy Minions must "cast a spell" to celebrate difference, and create "a world where there is no gay shame, no slut shame, no gender shame, no colour shame... a world fuelled by love and individuality."

What better message could the Melbourne Festival present in the midst of Australia's current ideologies at war climate, where the real lives of vulnerable people become the targets of a political shooting gallery? With the divisive and problematic postal survey on marriage





Mama Alto



equality allowing the amplification and spread of hateful rhetoric on the validity and dignity of queer people and LGBTQIA+ relationships, the inhumane and destructive incarceration of asylum seekers based purely on xenophobia, the growing class warfare of the political and wealthy elite against the working class and those requiring welfare or experiencing homelessness, alarming rates of domestic violence against women coupled with structural misogyny such as the disparity of a gendered wage gap, and the continued disempowerment of this country's Indigenous peoples, Australia in the early 21st century is often a place of complex discriminations, heartbreaking cruelty and perplexing sociopolitical conflicts.

The dominance of white heteronormative patriarchal power structures, which positions itself as the "normal" and "natural", too often

obscures, harms and disadvantages the diversity of this country — and the same can be said of the United States. Taylor Mac's *24-Decade History Of Popular Music* was birthed as a response and challenge to these issues and this climate, an immediate and contemporary work with resounding and deep relevance. While we must be wary of too often transposing American-centric

understandings of sociopolitical issues onto Australian contexts, within the Melbourne Festival's mission of bringing unique and groundbreaking international art to Australian audiences, it is fabulous to see such a brave political choice take centre stage: may the queering commence.

Mama Alto is a gender transcendent diva, jazz singer, cabaret artiste and community activist; she features as one of the Dandy Minions in the Melbourne Festival and Pomegranate Arts presentation of Taylor Mac's *A 24-Decade History Of Popular Music*.

MAC ON MAC

A 24-Decade History of Popular Music was performed in its entirety for the first time last October, but just because it premiered doesn't mean it's finished. In fact each time we do it, it is a workshop, premiere, and small part of a long run. At its core, it's about commitment to the long haul. It's about "the arch of the moral universe bending towards justice" rather than arriving at it; it's about how communities are the ones who bend the moral universe towards justice; and about how we transform the thing that tears us apart into the thing that brings us together.

A 24-Decade History Of Popular Music is a reenactment of how the individual may lose the long game but communities and movements, if continually brought together, have the potential to thrive. One thing I like to say during the shows is that, "I'm not a teacher." I assume most people know at least as much as I do about most of the things I'm talking about, if not more. My job is to be a reminder. I'm reminding the audience of the things they've forgotten, dismissed, or buried (or that other's have buried for them). It seems to me, in this time of obstacle, of political cynicism, amnesia, polarisation, oppression, and upheaval that we are in desperate need for a physical, emotional, sensorial, and intellectual reminder that we can use the obstacles to strengthen our bonds and communal actions.