



High Priest

Amanda Lohrey on David Walsh and Tasmania's Museum of Old and New Art

The Moorilla estate is set on a peninsula of sandstone cliffs that juts out into the Derwent estuary on Hobart's northern fringe. Framed to the south-west by the looming grandeur of Mt Wellington and to the east by Mt Direction, the slopes of the peninsula are planted with grapevines, and a cluster of modern buildings perch atop the rise. It is here that the visionary project, the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) is due to open on 21 January 2011, an \$80 million wonder that will house a private art collection valued at over \$100 million. Already it has been hailed as the "Bilbao of the south" and the "Getty of the Antipodes", expecting an estimated 350,000 visitors per annum, contributing a major boost to the Tasmanian economy.

The owner and presiding spirit of MONA is 49-year-old David Walsh, a professional gambler and art patron. I have arranged to meet Walsh in Moorilla's restaurant, The Source, named after a John Olsen painting suspended from its ceiling, and on a wintry July afternoon I wait there in the company of his research curator, Delia Nicholls. It has been reported that Walsh dislikes being interviewed and can be difficult to engage, and while I dwell on the prospect of a fraught afternoon the man is suddenly beside me. He is tall and slim with grey-white hair that hangs almost to his shoulders; he is dressed in jeans, sneakers and a street-chic grey wool jacket. He looks younger than I expected, almost boyish, but has a vague, distracted air. When I thank him for agreeing to the interview he stares out over the winter-bare vineyard and says: "Oh, well, Delia tells me I have to do this."

Walsh is a man about whom a good deal of urban myth has arisen and I've long been curious as to how a working-class boy from Hobart's struggle-town suburb of Glenorchy, raised by a single mother, came to be a war lord of the international art world. I've read a rare interview granted to the German art magazine *Kunstforum International* in which he describes himself as a "misfit" child, "internal to the point of autism", a boy who lived inside his head and read his way through the classics of the western canon while collecting coins and stamps. Academically gifted, he might well have gone on to a career in research but, in the second year of his science degree at the University of Tasmania, he was asked by friends to develop a model that would enable them to win at blackjack in the nearby Wrest Point Casino. When

he discovered that the scope for winning at card games was limited he dropped out of his degree and, for most of the '80s and early '90s, spent 100 or more hours per week developing a mathematical model that would enable him and his partners to win at other forms of gambling, especially horseracing. This he now pursues on a large scale in a number of countries.

There is a network of people involved in Walsh's outfit, most notably his business partner of 30 years, Zeljko Ranogajec. Walsh met Ranogajec at university where the latter studied law and economics before he too dropped out to pursue a career in gambling. Walsh describes Ranogajec as a "relentless motivator and a loyal friend" who, despite not sharing his interest in art, has provided financial support for his collecting mania "whenever my cashflow dried to a trickle". As Walsh inelegantly puts it: "I am throwing the shit, he is happy to be the fan. And he doesn't even like the shit."

In 1995 Walsh and his consortium bought the picturesque Moorilla estate for a modest \$2.53 million. The estate and its winery had been established by the Alcorso family, immigrants from Mussolini's Italy in the late 1930s, who set up a successful textile business and then moved into wine-making. Claudio Alcorso acquired a national reputation as a patron of the arts until family strife and insolvency forced Moorilla into receivership. Whereas Alcorso was an art patron in the patrician European style, Walsh - by this time a collector of antiquities - was more your local hi-tech super-geek model.

While in South Africa in the 1980s on a blackjack expedition he made his first significant art purchase, a Yoruba palace door from Northern Nigeria. As he tells it in the *Kunstforum*, he saw it in a gallery in Sandton with a price tag of \$18,000. At that time it was illegal for a visitor to take more money out of South Africa than they had taken in, and since \$18,000 was the approximate amount of excess money Walsh had on him he bought the door. This was the beginning of a world-class collection encompassing Roman, Hellenic and Egyptian artefacts and, in need of somewhere to store them, he set about transforming the original villa on the Moorilla estate - designed by the Australian architect Roy Grounds - into a small antiquities museum. It was an enchanting little place of rare intimacy and charm; when I first visited it in the late '90s I was smitten. Little was known



about its obscure owner and few visitors to the museum even knew his name.

All this has changed with the construction of MONA. It's an ambitious venture with estimated running costs of \$7 million per annum and Walsh has decided it must pay its way. Reluctantly, he has begun to make himself more accessible and he offers now to take me on a tour of the museum construction site. I know that almost the entire gallery space of MONA is underground and as we walk to the site office to don hard hats and fluoro vests I ask the obvious question: why down and not up? Most wealthy art patrons build great edifices that rise into the air like modern cathedrals, so why has he chosen to burrow into the earth?

"When you go to the British Museum," he begins, "you know what you're going to get. It's amazing but it doesn't confound your expectations." What Walsh wants is for you not to be able to see what you're getting. "Great museums are like temples and would have you believe that knowledge is a matter of revelation and you are the empty vessel that has to be filled. You turn up and there it all is, laid out for you, the sum total of human wisdom, and you're there to be enlightened. You always walk upstairs and you always walk into some grand citadel. In my opinion this is not how we learn things." He wants the layout of the museum to reflect the scientific paradigm: "Gradualism would be a better metaphor, learning by increments through guesswork and experiment, but with constant attempts to falsify." He says it's fairly well known that he is a "rabid atheist", and this has determined the philosophy of the layout. "I'm trying to build a museum that you discover gradually. It's a secular temple, or you might call it an un-temple, which means it has to be concealed."

He describes how the ground on top will be landscaped to look nondescript: "I'd make it a car park if I could." He contemplated turning it into a skateboard ramp but the council deemed it unsafe. As it is, he might hold concerts on the surface or a weekend market. He wants the museum to be fun: a "subversive Disneyland".

By this time we have arrived at the entrance to the museum, which is the old Roy Grounds villa and former antiquities museum, now partially gutted. As we descend a winding staircase some 20 metres into the earth, Walsh points to the foundations of the original house; he intends to keep them exposed because "they are in themselves interesting". It becomes apparent that everything is of interest to Walsh - that he is a man who takes nothing for granted and has thought about every detail on the site. He describes the excavation as inverse archaeology and tells me the builders and engineers had to remove 60,000 tonnes of earth and sandstone before the building could begin. To line the interior walls took 3 kilometres of rock sawing, 1.5 kilometres

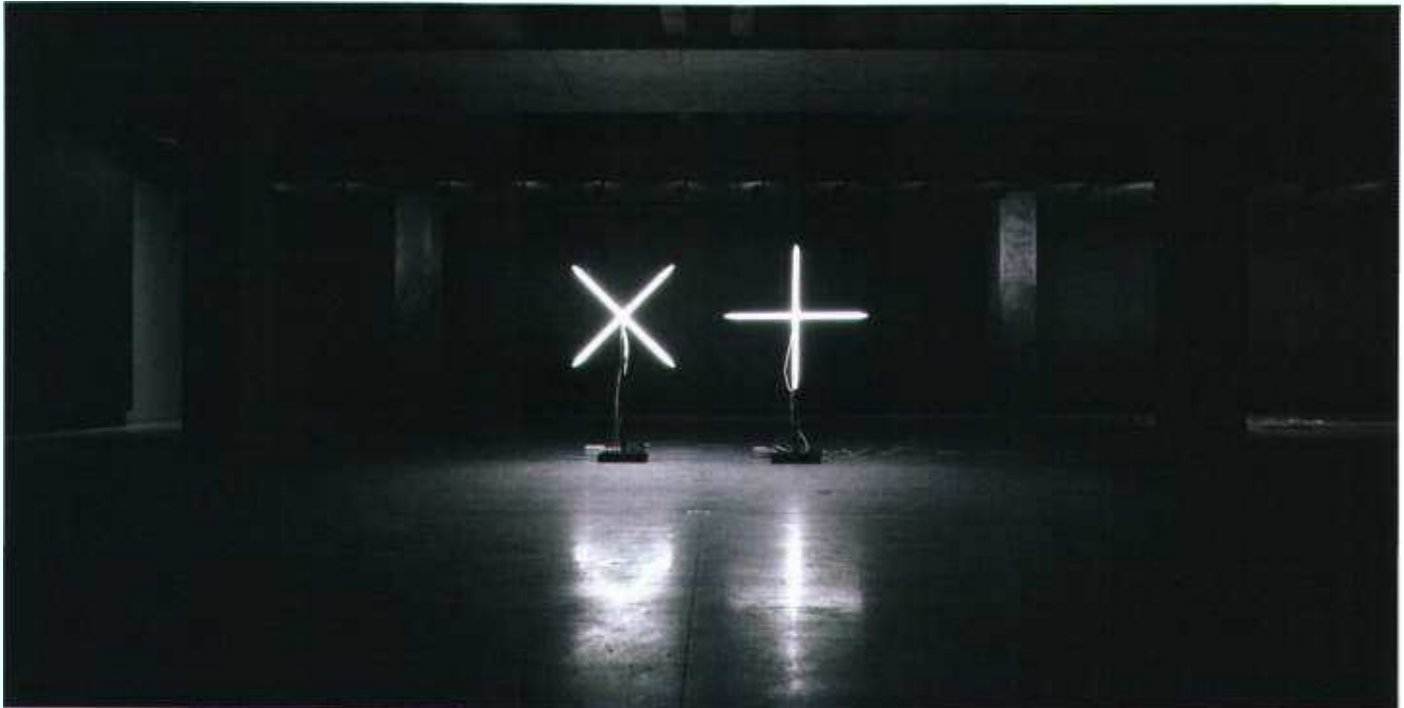


David Walsh at the MONA site, 2010.
 © Museum of Old and New Art

of drilling for rock bolts to maintain the rock face and 5500 cubic metres of concrete to fill the ensuing hole. That 'hole' is now 6000 square metres of exhibition space over three levels.

At the bottom of our descent is a vaulting space like a cathedral nave with walls of golden sandstone that look as if they've been hauled from some pharaoh's palace but have in fact been cut from the site. "This will be the bar," he tells me, "it's the first thing you'll see. We'll have functions here, rock bands, DJs, all kinds of events." Then he points to an area adjacent to the bar. "Just along here will be a little cemetery where your ashes can be interred." There will be a charge for depositing these, he explains, and they will be stored in huge urns etched in an eighteenth-century style and displayed in ornate cabinets with velvet curtains on either side and a steel fence in front, of the kind you sometimes see around gravestones. "I like the idea of a resolved secular death where you can go and have a glass of chardonnay and commune with the dead person. I'd love to have had a crematorium but that proved difficult."

Already I can envisage MONA as a popular site for secular funerals, perhaps with its own resident civil celebrant and performance artists, and I tell him he might be surprised by the demand. "In that case," he quips, "I'll put the price up."



MONA turns on the lights; *Monanism* is the opening exhibition January 2011. © Museum of Old and New Art

We walk on through empty spaces, a network of nooks and crannies and long vistas from viewing platforms, and a giant industrial staircase that is the one feature visible from almost every vantage point. Walsh is explaining where the major artworks will be installed. Here will be a work by the Mexican artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, a network of electrodes and light bulbs that will measure your pulse rate; nearby, an installation by the German artist Julius Popp, a waterfall that monitors the internet so that words popular on Google News cascade in the water. The Pausiris gallery on the second level will resemble a swimming pool where you walk over stones in shallow water to see a sarcophagus. In one of the smaller galleries, loosely referred to as 'the catacombs', will be the Cuban artist Wilfredo Prieto's *Untitled (White Library)* (2004-06), a library of 6000 white books and papers, all of them blank. The overall number and variety of works in Walsh's collection are staggering.

Walsh describes the spirit of the building as one of "anti-compartmentalisation" in which design mirrors philosophy. The three levels will consist of temporary walls to maximise the adaptability of spaces, all walls will be angular and there will be no tyranny of the rectangle. "Everywhere is everywhere and there's no thematic structure, apart from the Sex and Death gallery, which will be the one curated space," he explains. It will be a "sparse hang", full of surprising juxtapositions, so that, for example, an exquisitely detailed Egyptian mummy case may sit beside a model of the eutha-

nesia machine designed by Dr Philip Nitschke. *Everywhere is everywhere*: it reminds me of Salman Rushdie's description of postmodernity in his novel *Fury*. Under globalisation everyone's story will sit alongside everyone else's, and this is just how Walsh wants it. It drives the more rigid academic curators crazy, he says, but he wants you to contemplate conflict and contradiction: he wants you to think.

Several works in the MONA collection have already generated a fair amount of thinking. These include the Chris Ofili portrait *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) in which the British artist of Nigerian descent depicts a black Madonna with elephant dung over one breast and a background collage of female genitalia from magazine clippings (the work sits on the floor supported by two balls of elephant dung). It's the same work that caused a scandal in New York when exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999 as part of the Charles Saatchi collection *Sensation*. Mayor Rudy Giuliani denounced it as blasphemous and initiated a court case against the museum, threatening to withhold its funding. *Sensation*, which was scheduled to exhibit at the National Gallery of Australia the same year, was rejected by former director Brian Kennedy at the last minute and there have been hints of federal intervention. In a characteristically finger-raising gesture against official piety, Walsh bought it, though he doesn't even bother to mention this on my tour. He's more concerned to explain a new version of the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye's provocative *Cloaca* machine - an elaborate model of the human digestive system that will hang from the ceiling and excrete mock turds - or



the ingenious *Locus Focus*, commissioned from the Austrian artists' collective Gelitin. Concealed within the cubicles of the public lavatories, this work uses a binocular mirror system to give you a view of your own anus. "I'm interested in the way we compartmentalise our lives by concealing from ourselves the processes that make us," he says. "We sanitise things so we can defer responsibility. So this is a rather un-subtle metaphor."

I tell him I like this idea of the mirrors, that while it could be interpreted as deconstructive it also takes you back to the innocent curiosity of childhood where you lock the bathroom door and investigate your body with a hand-held mirror. "I never did that," he says.

While he denies having any collecting strategy, over the years Walsh's acquisitions have tended to cluster in three major categories. There are the antiquities - everything from Yap stone money to a 5000-year-old basalt altar from the Golan Heights - and there's a significant collection of Australian modernist painting, with artists such as Sidney Nolan, Arthur Boyd and Brett Whiteley. In 2006, as an anonymous phone bidder, Walsh bought John Brack's *The Bar* (1954) out from under the nose of the National Gallery of Victoria for \$3.17 million and sold it back to them in 2008 for what he paid for it. Then, when the NGV set up a public appeal to help pay for the painting, he got caught up in the fervour and made a donation. "My strategy is not very cohesive."

The third category of works is by far the most controversial: his cutting-edge collection of conceptual art by leading international modernists such as Paul McCarthy, Erwin Wurm, Damien Hirst and Jenny Saville. The popular press has chosen to sensationalise acquisitions such as Stephen J Shanabrook's *On the Road to Heaven the Highway to Hell* (2008), a chocolate sculpture of the mutilated body of a suicide bomber, or Walsh's decision to pay the French artist Christian Boltanski to video his every move for the rest of his life (shades of the Warhol movies of the '70s). But Walsh says he welcomes confrontation and would be quite happy for people to picket the museum. "I like a bit of drama."

Given these elements of the scatological and hi-tech avant-garde, it may come as a surprise to some visitors to discover that the heart of MONA will be Sidney Nolan's *Snake* (1970-72), a gigantic rainbow serpent of 1620 individual panels of flowers, animals, birds and human heads that will extend 45 metres along a huge curved wall. All of MONA has been built around this single work on the myth of creation. "We started with this and worked out," he says, and describes how it will be exhibited in concert with three other works on the nature of myth and how the mind processes it; a 6.5-metre high painting by Anselm Kiefer on the nature of myth, a sculpture commissioned from the American



artist Gregory Barsamian on “the chaos of thought”, and an installation by Jannis Kounellis of seven sides of freshly slaughtered beef, slung on hooks above sacks of coal. “I wanted to put an abattoir in the museum where the beef could be slaughtered but the idea had some logistical problems,” says Walsh, as if this were merely a mundane practical detail. What he loves about the myth gallery is that each work has “a lot of intellectual complexity and is also a really beautiful thing in its own right”, although I’m having some doubts about those sides of beef. Will the four works come together as a meaningful whole? “We’ve made a video game model of the gallery,” he says, “so we’ve got a pretty good idea.”

A winery, an abattoir, a cemetery, a bar, a market, a space for music, a library, a gallery on sex and death, a museum that radiates out from the serpent rainbow of creation – it brings to mind something I once read about the design of the Taj Mahal. The Taj may well have been part of a larger plan that sought to create in marble the Islamic model of paradise. And here is MONA, designed to be an exemplary experience of the phases of earthly being, a secular map of the underworld. By this time I’m beginning to feel that I’m in some magnificent labyrinth and I half expect to see the Minotaur hoofing it around a corner. What happens if visitors get disoriented?

“MONA is very difficult to navigate and that’s the point,” says Walsh. “I’m trying to say that what we know is extracted painfully and what we know, or what we think we know, is constantly changing. The layout of the museum is a metaphor for that.” But he doesn’t want you to get lost, so every visitor is going to be issued with an ingenious device he’s commissioned that knows where you are. This hi-tech equivalent of Ariadne’s thread will be multi-functional. It will not only guide you, it will tell Walsh and his team how long you spend in front of an exhibit, with a LOVE/HATE button you can press for feedback. It will also provide some information on the artworks, though not of an orthodox kind. “I want no labelling or visual explanation on the wall. I don’t want to create expectations or pre-judge your responses. The need to explain works with interpretive material vanished with the internet. Go home and look it up. I want to create a need to know. If people leave more curious than when they arrive then that would be a great outcome.”

This doesn’t mean there won’t be some intriguing material on the device: music, videos, gobbits of information but no monological or homogenised commentary. Some of the content will be creative in its own right and he cites the involvement of Damian Cowell, former member of the rock band TISM (This Is Serious, Mum): “We showed him a bunch of art and he wrote songs about it specifically for the device.” But not all devices will have the same content.

If a couple go around with different information on their devices it will be more likely to stimulate conversation, he says. It’s an idea that arose out of a discussion he had with a museologist in Florence. “You’ll have something on your device that your friend won’t have. You’ll have something to contribute to the discussion so you won’t feel foolish or out of your depth.”

When MONA is completed there will be one way in and the same way out, like a womb, but this afternoon we are exiting through an opening in the unfinished construction works – up and out into the air where Walsh points to the river, ashimmer in Hobart’s crystalline light. There won’t be enough parking on-site so he has contracted with a company to run ferries from the city’s docks up the picturesque Derwent. He shows me the jetty where visitors will disembark and ascend a steep concrete staircase to the museum entrance; he says it has been designed to resemble in feeling the disembarkation from a dangerous sea voyage to a Greek island. “The first thing you did was walk up the hill to give thanks in the temple for safe arrival,” he explains and this reminds me that his architect is the Greek Australian Nonda Katsalidis. Walsh met Katsalidis when buying his Melbourne apartment from the architect-developer, and MONA is the eleventh building Katsalidis has since designed for him. “The sort of thing Frank Gehry builds are temples to himself,” says Walsh. “The inside and outside have nothing to do with each other.” This leads to a discourse on form and function and his admiration for Katsalidis, whom he thinks relates the two “better than anyone else in Australia”.

I ask how many people the site will employ and he says “around 50” with 30 or so already fully involved. After the Yoruba door, he began collecting through dealers and auctions; he found that he got on well with some of the Sotheby’s staff and offered them employment at the museum. One of them is the former managing director of Sotheby’s, Mark Fraser, whom Walsh describes as having had a lot to do with shaping MONA’s present business model. But there is no resident curator. “We’ve got curators on staff,” he says, “but it’s all of us really.” That ‘us’ includes an office in Melbourne with Jane Clark, who advises on the Australian modernists, Nicole Durling, who is also ex-Sotheby’s, and Walsh’s curator for contemporary Australian art, French Swiss curator Olivier Varenne, based in London, and the internationally regarded French consultant curator, Jean-Hubert Martin. There are other curators who research and write, a librarian, an exhibition designer and design staff, a registrar and technical staff. Walsh’s older sister Lindy-Lou Bateman studied painting and photography as a young woman and is involved with several aspects of the museum.



After the tour we return to The Source for coffee and settle at a table in the corner that looks out through plate glass windows to the river. I tell Walsh that people often remark on his decision to live in Tasmania, not far from where he grew up, and to build the museum there. "I kind of like it here," he says, adding that he has joint custody of his six-year-old daughter, who lives in Hobart. In any case, he adds, globalisation creates a vertical market so that people will travel to see what they're interested in "and being in Hobart makes it more interesting".

In New York it might be just another museum and gallery? "In New York it would probably emerge as having some validity but it would become less a temple, less a destination. The philosophy of the thing that I'm screaming through a megaphone would be drowned out by the crowd noise."

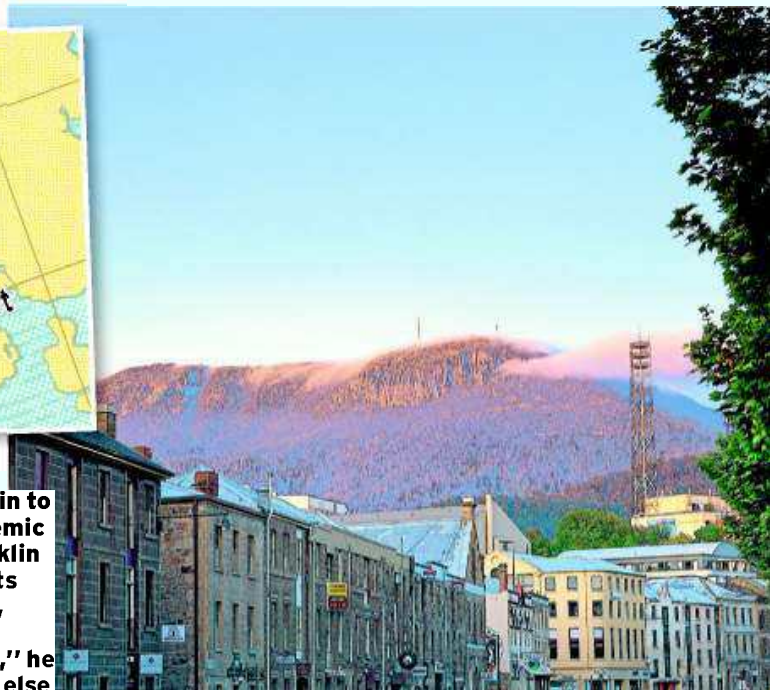
It's clear he wants to create a kind of secular pilgrimage and, insofar as the museum is exploratory and isn't trying to objectify taste, he hopes it may become a rallying point for secular humanism. He also wants to expand the conversation he is continually having in his head. He likes people who are direct, who argue back and who challenge him, though they had better make a good case, something he doesn't always get from artists. While he credits Gregory Barsamian with helping him to understand "why art is an efficient communicator", many others, he says, have little idea why they do what they do. "When interrogated their ideas can be vapid." His own theories about art derive from evolutionary biology. "The underlying motives of artists are either satiation or propitiation, access to sex or avoidance of death." There's also a reproductive drive involved; artists are peacocks competing to exhibit the best display of feathers as a way of attracting mates. "I built a museum because I'm a peacock shaking its feathers." That said, he can imagine a "valid" life without art and the mathematics of gambling still remains his first love.

One of the more remarkable things about Walsh is that he appears to have no sense of entitlement and occasionally refers to his wealth as unfair: "I've done nothing for the money." He believes that his path in life was a fluke, a product of circumstance, and when I try to press him on this I get nowhere. I know, for example, that he attended a parochial Catholic school; I ask him about the influence of his Catholic childhood and he is dismissive. As a child he had an aptitude for science and this brought about his loss of faith, not vice versa. When he gave his religious instruction teachers grief by demanding evidence for the existence of God he was often made to stand outside the classroom in the cold and he resented it. Yes, but might not this humiliation have driven him to construct his secular temple? Christian dogma is full of suspicion of the body, I say, hatred even, and



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A passion for trout fishing prompted Dr Adrian Franklin to move from Kent, England, to Hobart in 1991. An academic and presenter-panellist on ABC TV's *Collectors*, Franklin admits that whenever he leaves the island he misses its wonderful-tasting brown trout, as well as the seafood, vegetables and salad greens, fruit and the pinot noir. "Tasmanian ones are the best; you can't go past them," he says. "You get sniffy about other wines." Here's what else Hobart has that satisfies his senses.

“When I moved to Hobart, it had a kind of naivety about it. It was very fresh and clean and it looked almost like an English cathedral town by the ocean. It was recognisably English but also had American influences in the architecture of places such as Sandy Bay. The city had a nice mix of architectures, people lived well and had fantastic gardens.

We had young children at the time and Hobart was a city where children could safely walk about. We had come from Bristol, where you couldn't do that because of bad traffic and bad people. I admit I came here because I'm a keen fisherman and this place is heaven.

We have trout in the Derwent River, in lakes, everywhere.

Back then, the Retro in Salamanca was the place for decent coffee. It was a bit of a lifesaver.

Now, the coffee's as good as Melbourne's and Hobart is much more cultivated and sophisticated. Battery Point has gone from strength to strength for food and wine.

The bars in Salamanca are good. The vibe today is one of inner-city excitement that spills out episodically; it's now more like a party town on weekends and at festival times, yet it can still be quite quiet during the week.

Hobart has understood its historic, social and cultural significance. The festivals are

amazing and you cannot get a hotel bed during festivals or when the Sydney-to-Hobart race is on.

I've just had a sneak preview of MONA [Museum of Old and New Art, set to open in January], which will house the largest private art collection in the country. It's an unbelievable space that will have one of the most astonishing modern art collections. Also, the building itself is second to none.

One of my great pleasures on a Friday night is to go around the galleries and exhibitions. Because the city is so compact, you can see and do it all.

And there's a kind of optimism here. People are really proud of their city.



My picks

Drive to the start of the walks on **Mount Wellington**. Go on the Myrtle Gully walk. wellingtonpark.org.au.

Drive to a beach. Take a bottle of chilled wine and lever the oysters open at the rocks.

A linear park follows the banks of the **Hobart Rivulet**. Walk to the **Cascades Garden** and the historic brewery. hobartcity.com.au.

The **Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens** has lovely old high brick walls and a nice mix of natives. I like **Pete's Patch** and **Cactus House**. rtbg.tas.gov.au.

Hobart has excellent bookstores and quite a lot of antique shops. **Resource Collectables** is also good. It's a charitable tip shop and a great little place to get into. 117 Elizabeth Street, (03) 6231 4838, resourcetipshop.com.

If you've just a day left, drive to **Mount Field**. You'll pass through a landscape that changes constantly. Stop at **The Salmon Ponds**. It's the oldest trout hatchery in the southern hemisphere and a historic site. salmonponds.com.au.

Snapshot

Hobart's deep-water port is a hub for Antarctic vessels, cruise ships and racing yachts. The southern gateway to Tasmania's interior wilderness, Hobart's features include historic sites and cool-climate food and wine.



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Homecomings with hostility

The Empty Family

by Colm Toibin, Picador, \$29.99

Stories

edited by Neil Gaiman and Al Sarrantonio
 Headline Review, \$32.99

THE pivotal point of Colm Toibin's 2009 novel *Brooklyn* is when his heroine Eilis must head back to Ireland after two years in America because of a death in the family.

Four of the nine stories in Toibin's new collection, *The Empty Family*, concern wayfarers going home for a similar reason — the death of a mother or a mother figure.

But their tone could not be more different than *Brooklyn's* one of mute submission. Here Toibin writes with rage.

The narrator of the first story, *One Minus One*, speaks of "the bitter past [that] has come back to me tonight in these alien streets with a force that feels like violence".

These are tales of alienation from family, home and old lovers, of the rejection of those who have acquired outsider status.

The most unsettling of them is *The New Spain*, in which a woman who had to flee Franco's Spain ahead of her arrest as a Communist, returns after the death of Franco and of her beloved grandmother to claim her inheritance. Her mother and father barely bother to conceal their loathing at the sight of her because, as well as having disgraced them with her politics, she now owns the properties they inhabit in Barcelona and Menorca.

Deviating from the homecoming scenario, in *The Street* two Pakistani indentured workers in Spain risk catastrophe by forming a homosexual relationship.

In another story with a Spanish setting, Toibin celebrates the unfettered sex a young Irish man experiences on moving to Barcelona in 1975.

Toibin has the most fun, though, in *The Pearl Fishers*, about the relationship triangle dating back to schooldays of two sexually involved men and the feisty woman who marries one of them.

Thrown into the mix is a revelation 25 years on about the charismatic priest who was an intellectual mentor to them at school.

AMONG the entertainments announced recently for next January's MONA FOMA arts festival in Hobart, is British-born author Neil Gaiman reading out his story *The Truth is a Cave in the Black Mountains*.

This exciting tale makes its print appearance in an anthology compiled by Gaiman and Al Sarrantonio, entitled simply *Stories*.

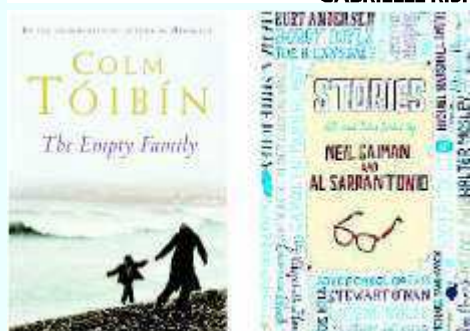
Michael Moorcock, Jodi Picoult, Roddy Doyle, Joanne Harris, Chuck Palahniuk and Dianna Wynne Jones are among the 27 writers to contribute original stories for the book.

The stories range from science-fiction offerings like Jeffrey Ford's weird and romantic *Polka Dots and Moonbeams* to Joyce Carol Oates' creepy tale about twins who are opposites, Lawrence Block's serial killer piece, *Catch and Release*, and Gaiman's own Celtic folk tale.

Stories is dedicated to the storytellers who "entertained the public . . . for Alexandre Dumas and Charles Dickens, for Mark Twain and Baroness Orczy and the rest, and most of all, for Scheherazade, who was the storyteller and the story told".

Gaiman says his inspiration for compiling the anthology boils down to the four words that best capture the thrill of a good yarn — "and then what happened?".

GABRIELLE RISH





Festivals heat up for summer

From digging for convict relics to digging great music, there's no shortage of fun to be had, writes

Greg Clarke

SOME of the state's biggest stars will again shine this summer.

The red carpet will roll out for the Taste Festival, the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race, MOFO and the Falls Festival – and all their fans.

In addition, next month a series of summer events will begin at the Port Arthur Historic Site, including three short plays, which will be performed twice daily. Admission to the performances is included in the cost of entry.

Port Arthur's summer program also includes Kids Dig Port Arthur. Children can get their hands dirty helping Port Arthur archeologists and archeology students uncover the still-to-be found history of the site.

The children will help out at the Saw Pits and Tannery, a real dig site. Armed with trowels and patience, the kids will have a good chance of unearthing artefacts.

Archeologist Annita Waghorn has been working on the saw pits dig for three years.

"This was where convicts worked sawing logs into planks and beams," Waghorn says. "Port Arthur is an incredible archeological site. Only a small fraction has actually been excavated. Digs like these really help us understand the lives of people who lived here."

Last year, one junior archeologist found a set of porcelain dentures. Children also found cell-door locks that may be from the Separate Prison. Household artefacts from Carnarvon – the name of the town that replaced the name Port Arthur at the end of the convict era – are regularly found: the convict saw pits became Carnarvon's rubbish dump, which can sometimes be like an archeologist's version of a gold mine.

Junior archeologists will be given not only tips but also a trowel to help in this version of a treasure hunt. The Summer Archeology Program is included in the general price of admission.

www.portarthur.org.au/summer

The Taste Festival

The Taste Festival (December 28-January 3) will this year be held in the handsomely transformed waterfront warehouse at Salamanca.

A new Taste program will give festival-goers the opportunity to not only sample fine food and beverages – the theme is Sensational Taste – but to learn about the journey of food from paddock to plate.

The festival has a new Taste Theatre for food and wine programs, lectures and guided tastings; a new program of "Red Cap" escorted and themed (sparkling wine, aquaculture etc) group tours of the Taste; a new precinct featuring Tasmania's burgeoning craft brewing and cider-making industry; a new Retail Alley, where visitors can buy Tasmanian products; and a new Cafe District offering table service and coffee and pastries.

Kids in the Park on Hobart's Parliament House Lawns will offer activities such as family outdoor board games, cooking classes for children, jumping castles and rides.

www.tastefestival.com.au
Sydney to Hobart

The Rolex Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race is 65 years old this year and it – along with the finish of the Melbourne to Hobart and Launceston to Hobart yacht races and the Taste Festival – will again transform Hobart's waterfront.

The Maritime Museum Tasmania (16 Argyle St) will be undergoing its own small transformation and staging a temporary Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race exhibition.

The exhibition will be open from December 17 until April.

While most of the exhibit will be in the form of photographs, there will be a focus on some of the Tasmanian boats that are prominent in the race's history.

The cutter *Westward*, the only Tasmanian boat to win the Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race twice (on corrected time), is part of the museum's Sydney to Hobart collection, although it will be in the water at Constitution Dock rather than in the museum.

"But there will be historic photos and information about it in the exhibition," curator Rona Hollingsworth says.

The plans of *Caprice of Huon*, another well-known Tassie racer, will also be part of the exhibition.

Other points of interest will be the display of communication equipment – things have changed a little since 1947, when a young reporter carried two baskets of carrier pigeons to



send daily eyewitness accounts back to his newspaper. A display will also tell of the race's dangers, including encounters with whales and the tragic 1998 race when six sailors perished in the extreme conditions.

www.maritimetas.org

MOFO

The third MONA Festival of Music and Art (MOFO) will be held from January 14-20 next year. MOFO is a drum roll to the opening of the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA). Curated by Brian Ritchie of the Violent Femmes, the music at MOFO gives audiences the opportunity to discover new ways to look at a variety of art forms.

US musical genius Philip Glass, Nick Cave (of Grinderman) and Speak Percussion's retrospective of massive scope – the story of percussive sound from the 1930s to today – will be part of the festival. Many of the performances will be in and around the Hobart waterfront and at MONA's home at Moorilla.

Two performances. Glass and Grinderman, are ticketed but most of the events are free.

www.mofo.net.au

The Falls Music and Arts Festival

Arts Festival

Those people not at the Taste Festival or joining in the Sydney to Hobart celebrations will probably be at Marion Bay for the 2010 Falls Festival (December 29-January 1).

This year, the festival will feature two main stages – the Valley Stage and the Field Stage. Interpol, Joan Jett & the Blackhearts, Paul Kelly, Angus & Julia Stone and Washington will make fine use of them.

The Marion Market, the Falls Arts Village, the Falls Fiesta, the moonlight cinema, and strolls to the beach add to the Falls' appeal.

www.fallsfestival.com

Devonport Cup

The big names aren't the only ones who know how to party or put on a good show. On January 5, the \$100,000 Devonport Cup, the lead-in event to the 2011 Summe Racing Carnival, will be as much a social day as a sports day, says Devonport Racing Club chairman Graeme Russell.

“It's a great social day – we get up to 10,000 people there,” Russell says. “It's a good carnival day and there are excellent picnic facilities.”

Neil Kearney will be the racing club's special guest on the day.

www.tasracing.com.au and 6427 2070.



ACTION-PACKED: (clockwise from top) Short plays will be performed at Port Arthur Historic Site; Sydney to Hobart race action; and young visitors join archeologists at Port Arthur.







A life of simple elegance by design

Property developer Brett Torossi's signature is evident in her designs of ecologically sustainable and aesthetic, leading-edge projects. In a rare interview, this intensely private, gifted woman talks to DEBI MARSHALL about life, loss and her vision

A FASCINATING fusion of enigmatic calm and dynamic eccentricity (her description of herself is "loyal, centred and determined"), Brett Torossi's blonde hair frames porcelain skin, falling softly around a vintage Chanel silk and wool tangerine jacket that she teams with pearl earrings.

Raised in Sydney, her expressive brown eyes twinkle behind purple rectangular glasses as she recounts a happy childhood where she learned much at her surveyor father's knee.

"I was drawing houses and designing streets from an early age," she says. "I was adored by my parents, and Dad and I used to go to art galleries together as often as possible."

Through art, Brett learnt early lessons in symmetry, colour and design, and she instinctively grasped spatial concepts and the hieroglyphics of complicated plans.

"I was born to be a developer," she says with a laugh. "The universe said, 'Thou shalt be doing this,' and handed me the tools."

Brett started visiting Tasmania 20 years ago to see her youngest sister, Stef, who had relocated here, and fell in love with the island.

"We used to go exploring and I was always

mesmerised by the beauty of the landscape, the wilderness, the water, the weather," she says. "Seven years ago I moved here to live. It has been wonderful."

Blessed with an infectious enthusiasm for life and work, Brett, who does not reveal her age, gained the surname Torossi from her second husband and admits she has never had to write a CV.

"I've worked for myself all my life and have never applied for a job," she says. "I am incredibly lucky to be able to do what I love. If I am asked to do something, I will crawl over broken glass to do it properly. My only regret is that I have to find time to sleep!"

At the core of what Brett calls her "operating juice" is love.

"I do work I love and I work with people I love," she says. "What could be better than that?"

However, life hasn't always handed Brett roses. Married at 22 and the mother of two sons, Ben, now 31, and Zennie, 27, her infant daughter, Ashley, died of SIDS.

For the young mother who spent hours just watching her children sleep and listening to the gentle rhythm of their breathing, the loss was unbearable. Later, her beloved mother



and grandmother also died and, deep in grief, Brett realised she was, in effect, the last woman standing.

"I figured that from that point on, nothing could be as bad again," she says philosophically. "I accepted that I may as well get on with it, and I also had my two wonderful sons to look after.

"Gaining a deep understanding of the impermanence of everything in this world builds a natural appreciation of all we experience and helps us to not flinch when the road gets tough. The losses softened me up and toughened me down at the same time."

Now she also has an adored grandson, 11-month-old Max, to dote on.

Brett's mantra is "participation" in life and her frenetic schedule is enough to exhaust mere mortals.

"I have an idea every three minutes," she laughs. "They just keep rolling in."

Presently completing her Masters in ecologically sustainable development, Brett also sits on four boards: Tasmanian Development; Tourism Tasmania; The Festival of Voices; and Tasmania's Early Years Foundation, where she works with other dynamic leaders such as Denis Rogers, AO, Bob Annells, Heather Rose and Dr Sue Jenkins.

"It is a privilege to work alongside such amazing people and it certainly keeps my learning agile," Brett says.

But despite her high profile and associated networks ("I can get stuff done," she admits with no hint of boastfulness), Brett is a private woman who does not seek publicity.

"I like being under the radar," she says. "It's a nice place to be."

Frequently interstate for work, Brett maintains a tiny rooftop eyrie opposite leafy St David's Park in Hobart where she works with an uninterrupted view of trees, sky and

birds and in her rare spare time goes fishing for marlin, tuna and shark. She and her partner of two years, Brian Jones, who she says "has huge amounts of energy and runs power stations", also share a "crash pad" in Salamanca and a home in Launceston.

Brett's grandfather, who she "inherited" from her Nan, lived with Brett and her sons for 22 years, and his death in September at the age of 87 was intensely moving for Brett and her family.

"We were so lucky to have had him in our lives and we could do no wrong in his eyes," Brett says. "When we were planning our move to Tasmania he said to me, 'Why are we going to that God-forsaken cold bastard of a place?' Despite never really warming to Tassie, he would still say, 'I'm the luckiest bastard alive! You wouldn't be dead for quids, would you, love? You wouldn't be dead for quids'."

Brett eschews the "knock-down" mentality prevalent in other states, preferring a marriage of old with new, and she recognised years ago that Tasmanian tourism also needed to cater to the high end of the market with luxurious products.

"We've enjoyed increasing numbers of tourists coming here over a long period of time," she says. "We needed a solid five-star as well as a three-star market, and we have it now. But overall we need to bring more people to the state – we have only 1.1 per cent population growth, half the rate of the rest of the country. Bring them in for holidays, bring them in for business and work, but bring them in."

"We need to be agile and creative in how we think about our opportunities, we need more cranes on the skyline building beautiful places, we need more activity. There's a lot of energy spent resisting change here, but in this interesting and small economy we have the



opportunity to do things that people in bigger places don't have. We can co-operate, integrate and collaborate. That's our greatest strength."

However, Brett warns that tourism is in for rough times ahead.

"With the Australian dollar at record highs and more Australians travelling overseas on discount airfares, the growth that the tourism industry has enjoyed over the past few years may well be challenged over the coming seasons," she says.

"Our industry needs to be united and consistently savvy. However, with generous investments such as MONA [Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart] and the beautiful Saffire [at Freycinet] I am hopeful Tasmania will be noticed in this competitive market both nationally and internationally."

For a relative newcomer to Tasmania, Brett is a fine ambassador for all the state.

"Tasmania is heaven, absolute heaven," she says. "The colour of the sky through all seasons, the gentle light, the changing weather, the ancient wilderness, the extraordinary landscape . . . even when it's pouring rain and freezing, it's still incredible. You get off the plane here and it feels like home should feel."

Not for this developer the claustrophobic, drab edifices of concrete and steel that have to date housed those who live on society's fringe. As busy and fortunate as she is, Brett is driven by a strong social conscience, wrestling with the deep inequities of those who dwell in Tasmania's "underbelly" and the negative consequences for communities where 34 per cent receive welfare benefits.

"Our most disadvantaged are just trying to survive," she says. "I want to create light, bright communities that open up opportunities and build resilience within its people."

Eight years ago Brett's company, New Ground Network, developed an 80-lot residential community in the working-class suburb of Hastings in Victoria. The concept included the development of Australia's first grid-connected solar-powered street lighting and was so successful that Hastings underwent a shift in perception, triggering a renaissance.

Now, using the same concept of community engagement, the company is developing the largest residential project in Tasmania, The Green in Launceston's northern suburbs, which will be home to 500 families.

"It took five years to get planning approval through council and the RPDC [Resource Planning and Development Commission, now the Tasmanian Planning Commission]," Brett says, brimming with enthusiasm about the project as she sips a glass of Tasmanian sauvignon blanc in a Salamanca restaurant.

"We are creating a cohesive, safe, sustainable community. At the core of The Green is the concept of planting a completely edible landscape. Wouldn't it be beautiful to see the children who live there nurture the trees planted in the ground and, in 10 years' time, make chutneys and jams from the fruit?"

"There has been a disconnection between our young people and what truly sustains them, and while this reconnection to the natural world is only a small step, it is a step of hope. I'd love the children from third-generation unemployed families to be inspired by the tradespeople working there, the labourers and painters and electricians, to think, 'I can do that, too'."

The locals are involved in every step of the project at The Green.

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The universe said, 'Thou shalt be doing this,' and handed me the tools.



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“Why go in and impose something on people they don’t want?” Brett says. “They know their neighbourhood better than us, so who better to tell us what they need and want?”

Brett’s design ideas are driven as much by aesthetics as simplicity.

“How complicated we have made our lives,” she laments. “We don’t need McMansions. What we should do is ask ourselves, ‘What do we really need?’ The answer is a return to simplicity, to what we love. The rest is just a circus.”

The beautiful coastal retreat of Avalon, south of Swansea, was born from Brett’s visions. Created in partnership with Tasmanian architect Craig Rosevear, this tranquil sanctuary does more than just nod to Great Oyster Bay and the majestic expanse of the Freycinet Peninsula beyond. A serene space of glass and light, it embraces the landscape from all angles, a luxurious neo-Modernist home perched high above the sea.

Bush of gum surrounds the house, enveloping it in seclusion. Watching a smoky dawn rise over the bay and a lick of lightning, flash across the peninsula, I hear the waves lapping on the beach below.

At night, only the hoot of owls, far in the distance, breaks the silence.

“You should stay at Avalon to get an idea of our design concepts,” Brett had said during our interview. “It is a wonderful place to relax and to escape the craziness and complexity of life.”

And so it is that I find myself relaxing in a superb Huon pine tub with a glass of Tasmanian bubbly, reading guest books scrawled with creative drawings and poetic praises for Avalon and marvelling at the

quirky, exotic artwork that Brett has collected from her overseas travels.

She was right. Avalon is a wonderful place to escape the chaos of everyday life.

It is also a place for all seasons where stress melts and where dreams have time to nurture. It is a magical and decadent paradise.

I will return to the city, with its stresses and chaos, but right now I feel like the luckiest bastard alive as I recall the words of Brett’s grandfather: “I wouldn’t be dead for quids, love. I wouldn’t be dead for quids.”



THOUGHT-PROVOKING: Brett Torossi like to keep herself busy.

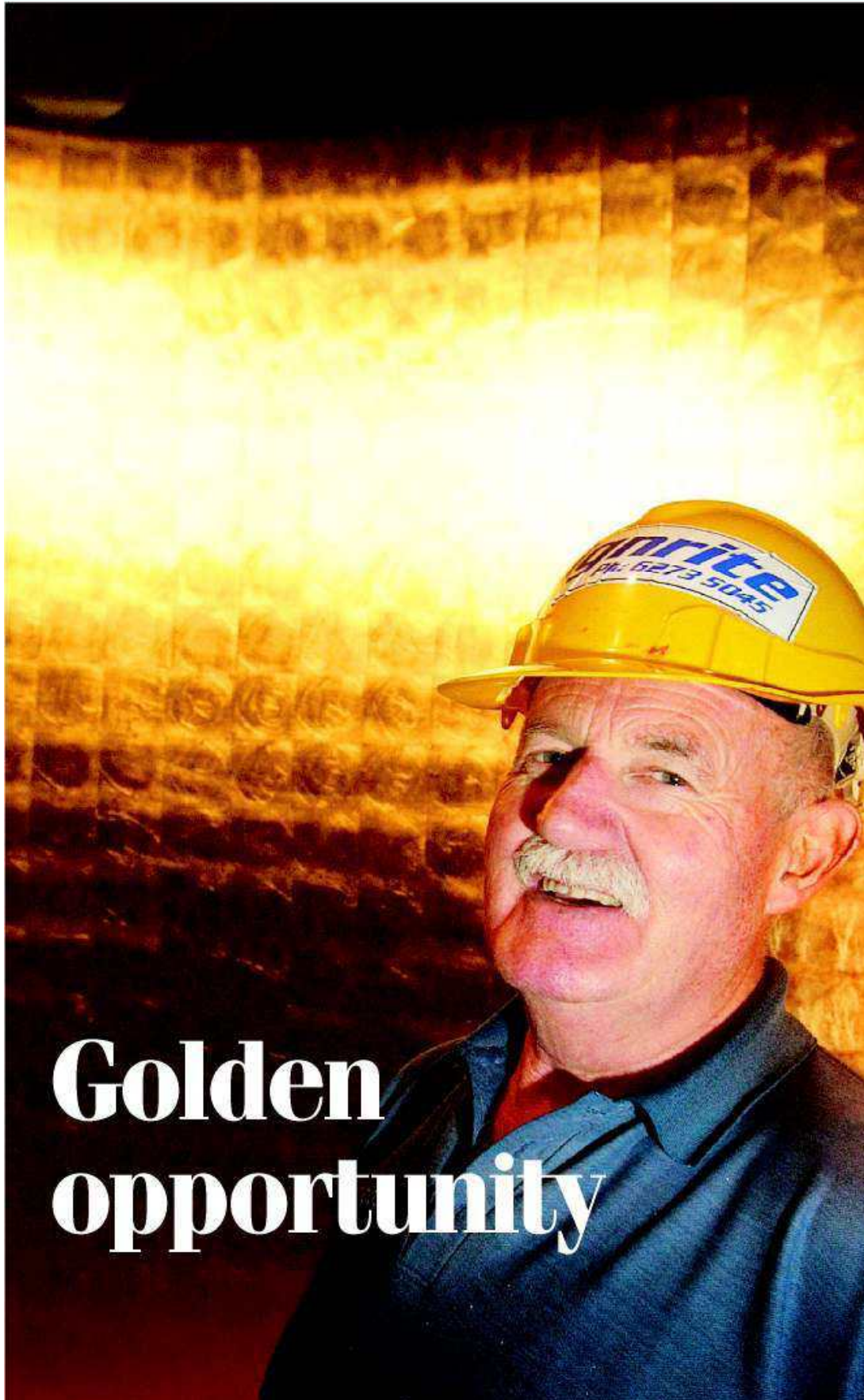
Picture: NIKKI DAVIS-JONES



AVALON: Built for the coastal views of the East Coast.



RIGHT AT HOME: Brett Torossi relaxes at her clifftop retreat, Avalon, near Swansea.
Pictures: SAM ROSEWARNE



OLD WAYS
Rod Busch,
who drew
on years of
experience
to produce
the magical
walls.
Pictures:
LEIGH
WINBURN



Rod Busch was hired to create a feature wall but ended up creating a new piece of artwork in its own right.

TIM MARTAIN reports

WORKING with sheets of beaten gold leaf so fine that a heavy breath could rip them, Rod Busch carried out what must be the biggest piece of gilding in Tasmania's history.

Busch, a professional signwriter, was hired by the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) to gild two walls, each 3.5m high and 22m long, as part of the museum's "Sex and Death" gallery.

The job took him four weeks and used 7000 sheets of the microscopically thin gold leaf to cover the 156 square metres of surface area, and the result is stunning.

And although these magnificent golden walls are undoubtedly works of art in their own right, this was not the original intention.

"We were asked to do the job because [MONA owner] David Walsh wanted these plaster walls to be golden and he wanted them gilded, not painted," Busch said.

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technology has changed, there is still a need for the traditional brush-and-paint from time to time.

"I learned by hand as an apprentice but it's all digital printing now," he said.

"So I'm letting the younger ones do that but I do the stuff that needs to be done by hand and I'm still required to do a certain amount of hand signwriting each week — so the dinosaur is still useful sometimes."

And the dinosaur was particularly useful when a representative of MONA walked into Busch's Glenorchy business to get a quote for a rather large job.

"They basically found us by accident after asking around about who was the biggest user of gold leaf in Tassie," Busch said.

"When they came into the shop and said they had a gold leaf job, I imagined they meant lots of lettering, but then they took me out there and showed me these two big walls.

"I didn't balk at it, the process is the same whether it's lettering or a whole wall, so I

"The wall has little slits cut in it and you have to look through the peepholes to see the sexually explicit artworks on display behind it, so the gold wall is basically just a feature, but I think it probably became a work of art in itself."

Busch, 63, from Montrose, has been a signwriter since he left school as a teenager and admitted that he only started in the trade because he wasn't qualified to do anything else at the time.

"I learned at Prairie Signs. I started there in 1966 and it was all done by hand back then, obviously," he said.

"I learned the trade by doing it the old-fashioned way and by training under the other older tradesmen who already had all those skills."

He has had his own signwriting business, Signrite, since 1976 and even though the

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thought, yeah, I could have a go at this and within three days we had prices worked out and I had total confidence in being able to do it."

Working alone for the most part, Busch spent almost a month carefully lining up each 100mm square piece of gold leaf and adhering it to the wall, stopping every metre to use a spirit level to ensure he was still perfectly straight.

"They were full eight-hour days, each morning going down into the dungeon, like a rabbit going down into my burrow," he said.

"I went to the supermarket on the way home after work one day and still had flecks of gold in my hair, on my skin, in my moustache."

The gold leaf was produced as a special batch by the Gold Leaf Factory in Melbourne to ensure all 7000 pieces were exactly the same colour and size.

The undercoat that the gold leaf sticks to as it is applied — called "gold size" — was a rusty colour, so that any naturally occurring



fractures or flaws in the gold leaf over time will reveal a burnished layer beneath, giving an antique appearance to the wall.

And since only small sections of each sheet are normally used at a time, usually for gold lettering on honour boards and the like, Busch noticed something interesting happening as he laid sheet after full sheet onto the huge surface.

"Each square looks like it has a raised centre, there's this swirled pattern, it's the same in every one," he said.

"That only started to appear after putting each leaf on. When sheets were on their backing paper they looked perfectly flat, that texture only came through once it was applied to the wall.

"I think it might be some kind of effect caused by the process of beating the leaf out flat but it's a bit of a bonus, it adds character."

For each square of gold leaf, a patch of the undercoat paint was applied and allowed to dry to the perfect point of tackiness — not too wet, not too dry.

Then the leaf was carefully laid against the paint, ensuring both vertical and horizontal edges remained in perfect alignment, and smoothed against the wall using a broad-tipped felt tool.

Once the gold was stuck to the wall, the tissue paper backing was peeled away and Busch used soft brushes to dust away any rough edges or overlap to create a perfect join.

"Because of the curve of the wall, it is bigger at the bottom than at the top so, to keep the vertical and horizontal lines, about every metre I had to measure to make sure it was still straight," he said.

"It was a challenge and I learned an awful lot while I was doing it but it gave me confidence in the old-fashioned way I was taught to do it. It was all about trusting my measurements and trusting my skill and falling back on my years of expertise."

Most of the staff at Signrite are digital signmakers now but Busch said the traditional brush-and-paint method always had its place so he has trained his son, Jeremy in the old-fashioned ways and Jeremy now virtually runs the business as Busch looks towards retirement.

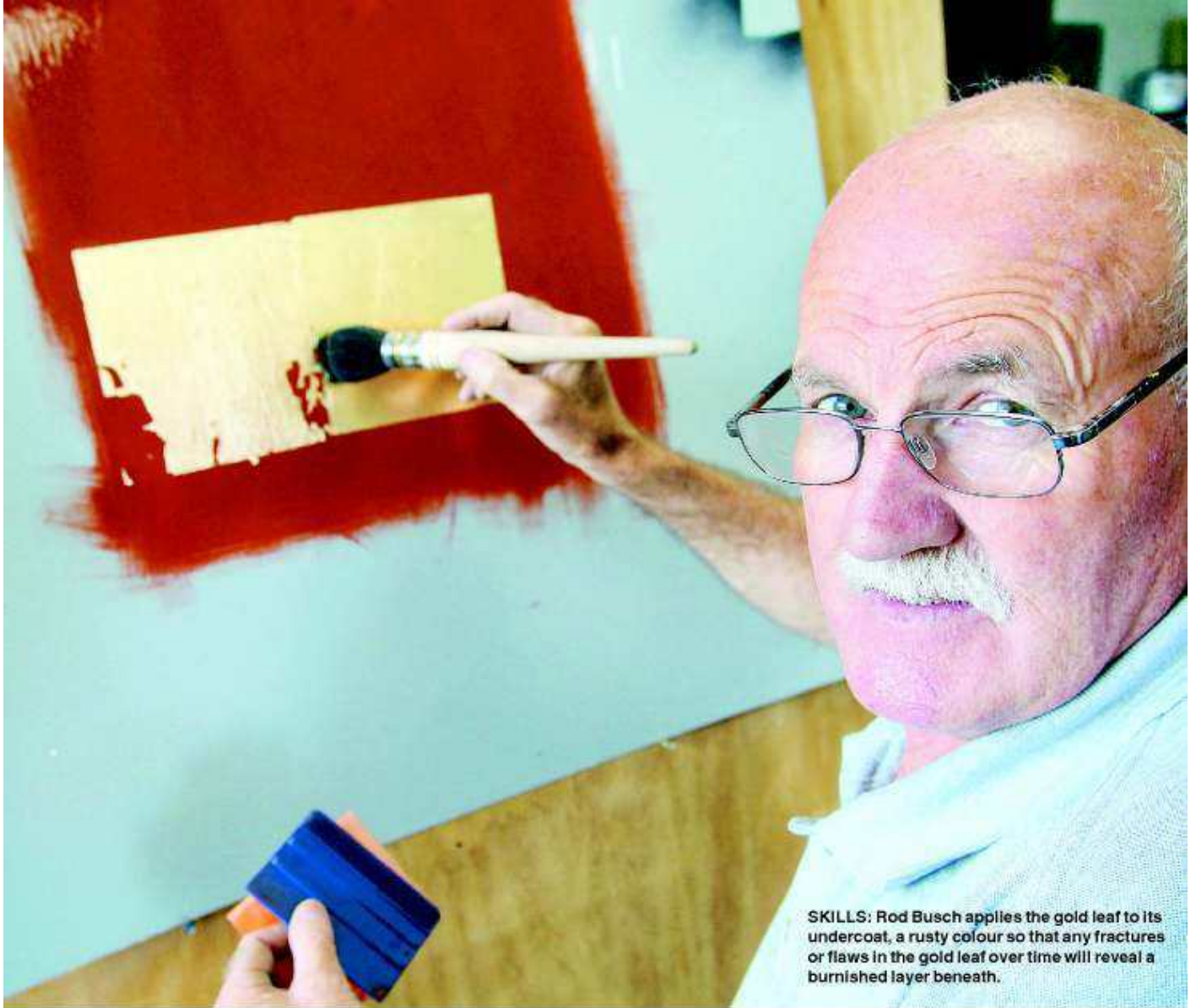
"Jeremy is a traditional signwriter as well but does all the digital stuff so, while I once trained him in the old skills, he's now been able to train me in the new digital stuff, so it's all come full circle," he said.

"And being able to do the hand-painted jobs means that these days I can basically pick and choose what I want to do, so every day I still look forward to coming in to work.

"I like to think it's almost an artform and there's certainly a lot of skill involved and even when I'm painting those temporary 'sale' signs on shop windows, people stop in the streets and say gee, it's nice to still see someone doing that."



COUNTDOWN





→

NO REST FOR THE GIFTED

Sharon Verghis casts an eye over a scorching summer for the arts

It looks like being a plain old New Year's Eve for Hugo Weaving. And Richard Roxburgh. Cate Blanchett as well. Jacki Weaver will probably have a quiet one, too. This is as celebrated a group of thespians as it's possible to get in one place at one time but there's no remission for stellar behaviour. They're all appearing in *Uncle Vanya* at Sydney Theatre Company, in a run that ends on Saturday, January 1, with shows at 1.30pm and 7.30pm. You'll be pleased to know they have Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and . . . drum roll . . . New Year's Eve off, though it's not going to be an overly big night for them, you suspect, with two performances the next day.

In Melbourne, Joanna Murray-Smith's *Songs for Nobodies*, with Bernadette Robinson, got such a strong response it has been extended to January 15, although Robinson is taking a short Christmas hiatus. As for the cast of David Williamson's *Don Parties On*, their show opens on January 13, so guess what Garry McDonald, Frankie J. Holden, director Robyn Nevin and gang are doing through summer? That's right, rehearsing.

Geoffrey Rush is also working, with *Belvoir's Diary of a Madman* running in Sydney until February 6 (it opens on Wednesday). Thankfully, Rush, who began rehearsals on November 15, will get some rest and recuperation when the play takes a break from December 24 to January 1. *Madman* will be followed into the theatre by *The Wild Duck*, from Belvoir's new resident director Simon Stone. It gets things off to a starry beginning with actors John Gaden, Ewen Leslie, Toby Schmitz, Anita Hegh and Eloise Mignon (see below).

Across the country, as most workers shake

out their togs and put in annual leave forms, our leading actors, directors, singers, dancers and backstage support teams are rehearsing or performing shows with just a few days off here and there. There's the usual flood of international guests, too, with their mixed motives of earning a living and escaping the northern winter.

Summer is a lucrative period for our leading companies, which are well aware it's the time of year when there are cash and time-rich local holiday-makers and tourists around. The Sydney Festival's Lindy Hume says this demographic is certainly targeted. "In summer, people are in an ideal state of mind for an arts experience. They've done Christmas and New Year, a year of stress is behind them, and many are in a hopeful and aspirational frame of mind. So you do see an engagement in the world of ideas and music and imagery, emotion and intellect."

It's also a vital season for the Australian Ballet, which traditionally ends its year with something festive or a big new blockbuster work. Artistic director David McAllister says: "You want it to inspire them to come back again next year. We always have pretty high targets for the income but, more than that, it's about the audience experience. We want to build on their enjoyment and understanding of the ballet."

This month the AB is riding high with a sold-out traditional production of *The Nutcracker* in Sydney and hopes Melbourne audiences will take as enthusiastically to the return of Stanton Welch's *Madame Butterfly* in Melbourne in February. Welch, formerly an AB soloist and now artistic director of Houston Ballet, is flying in to oversee it. It then moves on to Adelaide and Sydney.

Butterfly is getting an operatic outing, too: OA opens its year with Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* on January 7, featuring American lyric soprano Patricia Racette in the title role (she arrives on December 6), followed by a new *Carmen* from January 15 starring New York-based Israeli mezzo Rinat Shaham, who flies in on December 13. Both singers will be busy rehearsing during the holiday season.

OA has a keen eye on the tourist market. Marketing and communications director Liz



Nield says the summer season generates about one-third of the company's total annual box office income, so "it's incredibly important for us. We set our budgets per performance higher in summer than in winter. About 30 per cent of our audience over the year are tourists, but there's a much higher spike in summer." There are some nerves about next season given that the biggest overseas source countries in terms of audiences for the company — the US, Britain and Ireland — are all in some degree of financial strife, and Nield has her fingers crossed. "Generally there's a sense of celebration in January anyway and domestic audiences [rise]."

It's certainly a busy time. During the next few months there is a clutch of big-city arts festivals (Sydney from January 8; Perth from February 11, Adelaide Fringe from February 18; Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras festival in March), the arrival of two international opera superstars (Kiri Te Kanawa, Cecilia Bartoli) and the launch of two new multimillion-dollar cultural precincts, to name just a few of the key events.

At Melbourne's Malthouse Theatre the big news is that new artistic director Marion Potts will make her debut with a reworking of John Ford's *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (February 11). Another theatre highlight, this time at Sydney's Griffin Theatre, is the 15th anniversary production of Andrew Bovell's *Speaking in Tongues* from February 4. It will open — in a nicely symmetrical touch — back where it started at Griffin's recently refurbished Stables Theatre.

On the musical theatre front there is much anticipation about the February world premiere of *Doctor Zhivago*, with music by Lucy Simon (*The Secret Garden*), at Sydney's Lyric

Theatre. The super-successful *Wicked*'s Australian tour kicks off in Brisbane on January 11 before moving to Adelaide and Perth.

In classical music the Australian Chamber Orchestra will feature, among other things, two curated programs by *The New Yorker*'s eminent music critic Alex Ross in early March while the the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra celebrates its 75th anniversary with a concert by Te Kanawa on February 19. Perth has scored a coup by being the first capital city to host mezzosoprano superstar Bartoli, who will kick off her Australian debut concert tour at the Perth Concert Hall on March 2.

Offstage there's great interest in the January 22 opening of Tasmanian art collector David Walsh's Museum of Old and New Art, the spectacular complex built to showcase his \$100 million art collection. Hobart's MONA Festival of Music and Art (from January 14) can be enjoyed next year in tandem with a gallery visit, and composer Philip Glass will be among the guest artists.

A second new piece of infrastructure is Perth's long-awaited \$91m State Theatre Centre (housing the 575-seat Heath Ledger Theatre and a smaller studio). It opens next month with Black Swan State Theatre Company and Perth Theatre Company in residence.

With such an extraordinary range of events it's impossible to speak of a lull of activity during the festive season or a dumbing down. It remains true, however, that one of the key benefits of our southern hemisphere summer is the allure it has for top international arts names. "We certainly don't have to convince them very hard," Hume says. "We say, come on, come hang out at the beach, and they're, like, *of course*."



SPOTLIGHT ON ELOISE MIGNON

DESPITE the injunction about never working with animals or children, Eloise Mignon takes in her stride whatever is thrown at her. After two years on the set of *Neighbours*, which she pulled the pin on last year, she has busied herself in the world of theatre. Right now she's appearing in the Melbourne Theatre Company-Sydney Theatre Company production *The Grenade* alongside Garry McDonald. She also has a role in Belvoir's 2011 season-opening *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen's classic, in Sydney — and featuring, naturally, an actual duck, if director Simon Stone gets his way. "We had a week of workshopping the play and we talked about a live dog, or maybe a dead rabbit we could skin on stage,"

Melbourne-born Mignon, 24, says before her photo shoot for this week's cover. "But in the end, a duck seemed right." The show will launch the tenure of new

artistic director Ralph Myers at the helm of Belvoir; he also will be the set designer for Stone's substantially reworked production of the brooding tale of family secrets and lies, which opens on February 12. Mignon is to play the teenage tragic Hedvig, whose compassion for an injured duck leads to the most terrible outcome. "I have worked with animals before. On my stint on *Neighbours* I had a pet kangaroo and a few pet dogs," Mignon says. During the cover shoot, her natural empathy for the quacking co-star quickly emerges. "I think it could be a really great idea," she enthuses afterwards. "Me and the duck got along really well."

Stephen Fitzpatrick

Watch Eloise Mignon get up close and personal with the duck, and chatting with Stephen Fitzpatrick, at www.theaustralian.com.au

