

Paul Denny's work

words Kathleen Noonan

HE had news for Sideshow Alley is actor Paul Denny will be performing in Brisbane at Ekka time. His on-stage smile is so wildly manic it could challenge the clowns for balls and shatter the House of Mirrors.

On the same day Brisbane's annual agricultural show cranks up - August 7 - across town at La Boite Theatre another quintessentially Australian experience starts: a David Williamson play.

And Denny, a homegrown actor from Allora on the Darling Downs, will be drawing on his rural roots to play a "real bloke" in *The Removalists*.

"I can't wait to play Kenny Carter," he says. "He's an Australian male like so many I've known growing up in the '70s in regional Queensland."

On past performances, expect full voltage. On stage he fairly hums with overheated energy, like a rogue power line. And the Williamson classic is billed as a confronting yet fun piece of theatre.

In other words, a perfect vehicle for someone referred to as one of Queensland's most exciting talents. Denny will perform with a cast that includes Brisbane theatre veteran Errol O'Neill under the direction of Lewis Jones, who has been responsible for some of La Boite's biggest hits.

The Removalists was Williamson's first large-scale production and was the first of his plays to transfer overseas, where it was seen as a *avant-garde* in its realism and violence.

Based on a story told to Williamson in a pub by a removalist, it explores the power struggle that grows out of a wife-beating complaint.

"It's about sex and the abuse of power. Just a great combination," says Denny. In life, sucking on a cigarette and so drink in a West End cafe, Denny looks and acts like the nice guy he is in the Queensland Rail till the end of the advertisements and corporate videos.

Now 31, he'd have you believe he is quietening down with age. But on stage he gives off a certain possessed air. Think Jack Nicholson's grin. That's why he gets recognised several times a week, not just by artists but by punters at a Coorparoo service station or a King's car park in the City.

His characters stay with audiences, unsettle them: "Yeah, I like to provoke people to react a certain way, despite themselves. There should never be boring. Hate it or love it, it should never make you feel nothing."

He made Queensland audiences laugh at the lot of a brain-damaged child in *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*. His complex portrayal of a father, Brian, coping with his daughter's life "as a turnip", as he put it, was riveting and excruciating to watch. Audience

members squirmed one minute and laughed the next.

And then there was *Drown*. Those who saw it two years ago would not have forgotten it in a hurry.

In Queensland Theatre Company's "Dirty" season of new one-act plays, his confronting role in a tale of homoerotic ritual humiliation within surf club culture had people walking out - about 12 a night.

"And they shouted their disapproval as they went, of the brutality and of the boys' penis talk," says Denny. "The cast had a competition - who could guess how many would walk out each night."

At the end of the season, the winner got the kitty of money," he says, trying not to look well pleased.

Denny is often talked about as an up-and-coming talent, but talk does not pay the bills. He's just grateful to be able to write "actor" as his occupation on official forms. It could so easily have read "croupier".

"When I first started acting as a career, I nearly packed it in so many times. Several years ago I did a course to be a croupier at Jupiters Casino."

'It's about sex and the abuse of power, just a great combination'

Paul Denny

He was saved at the last moment by *Hamlet*. Or at least a part in the Shakespearean play's six-month tour with La Boite, "otherwise I'd be trapped in that bloody casino forever".

So rather than the cards, he takes his chances gambling on the prospect of making a living as an actor in Queensland.

"Try getting a credit card when you write 'actor' as your occupation on the application form," he says.

In recent years, he's balanced pay-the-bills voiceover work with gigs with Queensland Theatre Company, La Boite and some interstate work. "I'm passionate about my craft. When not working I study and read constantly to educate myself about it."

When *The Removalists* finishes on August 30, the real removalists will move in. La Boite Theatre closes the door on one of the past 31 years.

It moves to a new 400-seat theatre-in-the-round in the creative industries precinct at the old Crona Barracks site, Kelvin Grove, far from the traffic and noise problems posed by the redeveloped Suncorp Stadium near its old digs.

David Williamson's *The Removalists*, La Boite Theatre, August 7-30



COUNTRY boy ... Paul Denny is getting back to his roots with his *Removalists* character. Picture: Nathan Richter



IZZY or isn't he ... Eddie Izzard.

Straight up, is this Eddie for real?

words Sally Browne

WHO is Eddie Izzard? A master of disguise, the undercover comedian darts between one cult film and the next. Look! He's Charlie Chaplin. He's a tough-talking bookie. Look over there! He's a secret agent in drag.

Or is he really that funny, rambling bloke in high heels?

The truth is always much simpler. Eddie Izzard, the meandering-mouthed, PVC-pants-wearing funnyman, has made a career out of being himself. His acting roles are a recent addition to a career forged in stand-up, one that has earned him a huge and devoted following.

Izzard is in Australia touring his latest show, *Sexie*. "It could be called *Elbow*. But I thought *Sexie* sounded more sexy than *Elbow*," he says.

"It's going to be the continuation of the emptying of my mind; it'll be surreal, just talking complete crap for hours."

With Izzard, what you see on stage is pretty much what you get. "I have likened the experience to living on pure oxygen," he says. "It's really me. It's just a big me. It's just a very on version of me."

Izzard has always had a strong sense of himself. He says he knew he wanted to be an actor from the age of seven and a transvestite from the age of four. He spent his early years in Yemen, where his father worked as an oil industry executive, but his mother died of cancer when he was six and he was sent to a series of boarding schools.

"Part of me that's grown up has grown up since my mother died, really," Izzard says. "The other part has locked in as a kid, so that's probably the juxtaposition that works in the comedy."

The budding actor failed to get decent roles in school plays, but discovered he still had a sense of humour and, after making everyone except his chemistry teacher laugh, turned to comedy.

Izzard has made an art form of mucking about and "talking complete crap". His shows are largely improvised and can take the audience's brains anywhere from Pliny the Younger to the habits of bees (he does a great impression).

He started in sketch comedy and street theatre before taking to the stage. "They hated me," he says. Not any more. In Britain he is a phenomenon. On his current tour, he will be playing venues usually reserved for rock stars.

ALWAYS up for a challenge, he has even performed gigs in French. But the biggest challenge he has faced, after the death of his mother, was coming out as a transvestite. He first told his girlfriend, whose brother was gay, before finally coming out to his father at 29.

"Christ, it was the biggest deal of my life," he says, laughing. "Nothing more scary. I mean, doing gigs in French is nothing to coming out as being a transvestite."

"Coming out as a transvestite is the complete hardest thing in the bloody world. Climbing Everest is a doddle! No, Everest, I think, beats it. So it's a smaller mountain, like a big hill."

Luckily, most people were accepting, especially the ladies. "Interestingly, when I first came out, I really thought women would just say, 'Darling, this is no good; but I've been wondrously surprised to find that women find me very sexy.'"

Izzard has always made it clear where his preferences lie. "I'm a lesbian trapped in a man's body," he says. "I'm a straight transvestite."

Eddie Izzard's show, *Sexie*, plays at the Concert Hall, UPAC, on Saturday, August 2.

Hunters and collectors

Will the artistry of Philip Hunter's landscapes ensure he is the next Sidney Nolan? Time, and collectors, will tell

words Rodney Chester

THERE are two compelling forces that power Philip Hunter's life.

"My two driving ambitions have been the subject of landscape and the subject of painting," he says, speaking at a new Brisbane exhibition of his work at the Philip Bacon Galleries.

On the one hand, landscape has been a way to explore painting itself.

"And inversely, painting has allowed me to shape a vision and landscape or types of landscapes we encounter that add something to our understanding of the place we live in."

A combination of the desire to paint and a connection with landscapes has paid off for Hunter - his name is mentioned alongside Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan, John Olsen and Fred Williams in circles where the topic of creative landscape painting is discussed.

Hunter's works were shown next to Nolan's in an exhibition in Melbourne two years ago entitled *The Plains*: Wimmera and the Imaging of Australian Landscape, and his influence has been recognised with the recent publication of a book, *Wimmera: The Work of Philip Hunter*.

He also is seen as a non-indigenous Australian painter whose work forms a bridge with that produced by his indigenous colleagues.

Hunter lists several indigenous artists as among the world's most important in the past few years, and acknowledges their work is inspirational.

"The impact of that vision - it would be a nonsense not to acknowledge that in some way," he says. "Not that these pictures go out to emulate them. I don't think they look like any particular Aboriginal artist. Nor do I think they look like any particular European artist's work."

Hunter feels it is up to others, not him, to decide where he should be placed in the lineage of

Australian landscape painters, and as someone who, like others add his name to the legends of the past.

"Whether that's a fair claim or not, in terms of that hierarchy or pecking order, it's not my responsibility," he says. "And historically, it's yet to be proved."

The life of a landscape painter is not always easy. When Hunter was coming out of art school in the late 1970s, the genre of landscape painting was hardly fashionable.

"In terms of my generation, landscape has been about the most unhip thing that you can be fashionable in," he says.

"At times, you felt that to embrace it as a subject was to do so at your peril."

Hunter says the 1980s and 1990s were a low point for interest in the landscape art form. Yet at the same time, the subject of landscape was becoming a focal point in other ways, such as through environmental issues, land rights, the politics of water and salinisation and the wider issues of the republic, immigration and how we think of ourselves as a nation.

"All these things can generally be seen under a broad canopy that we call landscape," he says.

Hunter believes the role of the landscape artist is somehow to engage in a discussion of these issues.

"As long as people are prepared to do that, the subject of landscape for the activity of painting will continue to be relevant, rather than something that just used to happen in the 19th century," he says.

Hunter's interest in painting landscapes goes back to his early years as an artist. And his interest in it goes back simply to his early years. He says he has had an interest in art for as long as he can remember.

Since the late 1980s, Hunter has been lured back to the landscape of his childhood as a subject for his art. Then, in the past few years, he embarked on a substantial Wimmera project.

"It was a difficult decision to

actually embark on a large project about your own turf," he says. "You want to avoid nostalgia, and it's also not a particularly interesting landscape at first glance."

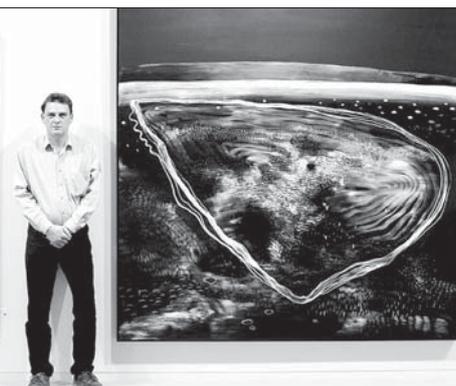
The paintings that form his Brisbane show and those in *The Plains* exhibition came after a discussion he had with Peter Haynes, director of the Nolan Gallery in Canberra.

Haynes asked Hunter to describe the borders and shape of the Wimmera.

"I remember the enormous embarrassment of not knowing the answer," he says. "As I looked into it, it became clear that not many people did."

Even the name, he says, appears to be a bastardisation of the word "Woomera". The area is vague and hard to define, and Hunter's landscapes reflect that.

The Philip Hunter exhibition is on at the Philip Bacon Galleries, 2 Arthur St, Fortitude Valley, until August 9



BRIDGING the gap ... Philip Hunter, whose works form a link to Aboriginal art.

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