

## Fantasy forms new link to old land



Cave critters: Nyols hover above Tom Green, who stars in an Erth show opening on Saturday at the Sydney Festival

Picture: James Croucher

### Rosalie Higson

NYOLS, fantastical creatures who live in caves, flit around a young boy on a dark stage, held aloft by a phalanx of athletic puppeteers, almost invisible in head-to-toe black.

*The Nargun and the Stars* is Erth visual and physical theatre's latest production for young people, based on Patricia Wrightson's 1974 children's book.

The show opens on Saturday as part of the Sydney Festival and will then travel to the Perth Festival.

Erth founder Scott Wright tried for 11 years to get his adaptation of the book into production. His idea was met with suspicion by those who questioned Wrightson's appropriation of indigenous stories.

"Her advocacy of the folklore of our indigenous heritage was so out there for her times," Wright said. "Now she is seen as a pioneer."

"I say to people that *The Nargun and the Stars* was written before the government stopped taking Aboriginal children from their families. She was saying white people need to know these stories, know this land."

Tom Green, 17, plays the orphaned Simon, who moves to NSW's Hunter Valley to live with his only relatives, a farmer couple played by Bill Young and Annie Byron.

Simon meets and has adventures with

spirits of the trees and water, the naughty Potkoorok, the mischievous Turongs and the cave-dwelling Nyols while fighting the terrifying Nargun.

Erth's performances are a meld of sophisticated rod, hand and large-scale puppets, digital effects, original music and live actors.

The puppets are designed and made by Steve Howath, Bryony Anderson and Chris Kovich. Kovich works with Weta Studios in New Zealand, known for its effects in the *Lord of the Rings* films.

The show's director is indigenous playwright Wesley Enoch. "There's an attraction to the story, with the magic of the landscape being played out (and) a little white boy trying to find his way into the landscape," he said. "I think that's a metaphor for where we are today, as a young country living in an old land — there's that need to connect."

Enoch said the Potkoorok and other creatures were not creation beings that should be secret.

"They're not dreaming stories, they are as much to do with fairies and goblins and trolls," he said. "With the popularity of fantasy like Harry Potter and *The Lord of the Rings*, kids are understanding that a landscape can have more depth, there's hidden secrets wherever you are, and to have an Australian story that says that stuff is fascinating."

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## Fears over deformed fish larvae

FURTHER tests have been ordered after two-headed fish larvae were found at a Queensland fish farm, raising fears of chemical contamination.

The deformed larvae were at a farm on the Noosa River, in the state's southeast.

Acting Premier Paul Lucas said people should not jump to conclusions until the incident was thoroughly investigated.

"Fish don't have two heads, they generally have one. And let's find out why that is the case," Mr Lucas said.

"It might be a natural genetic variation, it may be something totally unrelated to farming, but let's make sure we can make the decision based on evidence."

"Presumably if there were toxins in the river, toxins would be identified by testing but I have been advised none have been identified (although) they are doing even more detailed testing now."

The Queensland Department of Primary Industries will conduct further tests.

The fish farm is next to a macadamia nut farm.

Matt Landos, lecturer in aquatic animal health at the University of Sydney, said it was possible chemical run-off had caused the deformities.

He said several groups of fish from the Noosa River had batches of larvae that were severely deformed, the primary deformity being two heads.

"For the fish larvae, the most minute of doses can impact on their cells and cause damage," he said.

AAP

## Extra hours of sleep stop cold

PEOPLE who get less than seven hours of sleep have a three times higher risk of catching a cold than people who sleep eight or more, a study has found.

Researchers at Carnegie Mellon University in the US studied 153 people by documenting their sleep habits and then administering a cold-causing virus.

An explanation for the finding was sleep disturbance influences the "pro-inflammatory cytokines, histamines and other symptom mediators that are released in response to infection," the study's authors wrote.

AFP

## DNA may bring back Tassie tiger

Leigh Dayton  
Science writer

BENJAMIN, the last Tasmanian tiger, died at Hobart Zoo in 1936, but it appears we may not have seen the last of his kind.

International researchers have unravelled a type of DNA Tasmanian tigers inherited from their mothers, a development that raises the prospect of bringing them back from extinction.

Team leader Stephan Schuster said the work showed it was possible to identify all the genes that made a thylacine — its genome — for less than \$US1 million.

"It will also revive discussion on the possible resurrection of the animal," said Dr Schuster, of Pennsylvania State University.

Along with colleagues in the US and Europe, Dr Schuster ordered all the genes of the thylacine's mitochondrial DNA.

They did this using genetic material extracted from hair shafts snipped from a male and a female thylacine. The male died in 1905 at the National Zoo in Washington DC and the female died at the London Zoo in 1893.

Other scientists have extracted thylacine genetic material from museum samples. But until now the equipment was not powerful enough to get as much DNA as Dr Schuster's team reported last night in the journal *Genome Research*.

"It's really fantastic. I'm just sorry it wasn't done in Australia," said conservation geneticist Karen Firestone. In 2002-03, she extracted thylacine DNA from the skin, teeth and bones of thylacine remains held at the Australian Museum.

As the museum's director, Mike Archer — now dean of science at the University of NSW — set up the project, which ended when he left the job in 2004.

He welcomed the new work: "As the technology rolls out, what was once considered an absurd goal now seems less absurd. The question now is which group is likely to bring back the first extinct animal."

Professor Archer is so convinced this is possible that he confirmed he had initiated a multi-university project to obtain the genome of another extinct animal, with an eye to resurrection using advanced reproductive technology. However, he declined to give details.

The likelihood of success in bringing back the thylacine is high, given that the recent development of high-speed equipment for analysing DNA has already enabled a second team led by Dr Schuster to obtain a "draft" version of the entire genome of the extinct woolly mammoth. They reported those findings last year.

Not only did Dr Schuster and his colleagues obtain the first two complete mitochondrial genome sequences of the thylacine, they settled a long-running debate about the origins of the dog-like marsupial.

By comparing the thylacine genome to that of another Australian marsupial of known origin, the numbat, the team has shown the Tassie tiger was not an immigrant from South America, as some experts argue. Instead, it is an Australian mammal from a group called the *Dasyuridae*.

# Raiding powers for human rights body

Rick Wallace  
Victorian political reporter

VICTORIA'S human rights commission would be empowered to conduct wide-ranging discrimination investigations, compel witnesses to testify and conduct searches and seizures under proposals to dramatically boost the organisation's powers.

The state Government is considering plans to overhaul the Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, taking it from a complaint-driven conciliation body to a proactive discrimination-busting agency.

A current review into equal opportunity laws is expected to consider scrapping exemptions that allow exclusive private clubs such as the Athenaeum or Lyceum to bar male or female members. The recommendations for a major upgrade to the commission's powers came in a review conducted by veteran so-

cial justice campaigner and former public advocate Julian Gardner on behalf of Attorney-General Rob Hulls.

"The power to conduct an inquiry could include the power to compel the attendance of a person to provide information and/or produce documents," Mr Gardner's report recommends.

"These powers could be supported by the power of entry, search and seizure to obtain necessary evidence and documentation."

The Government is considering the recommendations and is believed to be supportive of boosting the commission's powers. It has referred the issue to a parliamentary committee, which will report in April, before it goes to state cabinet.

Mr Hulls has described the state's equal opportunity laws as "outmoded", saying "reform in this area is long overdue".

Melbourne QC Peter Faris

likened the proposed powers to those of a crime commission, and described the changes as a blow to free speech. "They would have to prosecute Prince Harry," he said, referring to the prince's recent "Paki" jibe to an army colleague.

"It's a big step. They are going to need lawyers and what would amount to police to conduct raids. It's difficult to see why it is necessary — there hasn't been any great outbreak of criticism."

Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission chief executive Helen Szoke told *The Australian* yesterday the investigatory powers could be backed by the ability to issue enforceable undertakings.

"The commission's view is that what we have now is not enough for us to fulfil our charter of reducing discrimination," she said. "These are powers that other states and the national human rights commission have

had for some time. (But) a good regulatory body would use its 'stick' powers, as opposed to its 'carrot' powers very sparingly."

Currently the commission can act only on individual complaints and offers conciliation services to the parties, as well as performing its research and education roles.


While the commission wants the power to conduct "own motion" investigations, it did not request the entry, search and seizure provisions recommended by Mr Gardner.

The Australian Industry Group's Victorian director, Tim Piper, said the changes ran counter to the Government's goal of reducing new legislation and red tape. He said the prospect of businesses being subjected to searches and seizures would force national employers to develop new procedures just for their Victorian operations.

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