



**UNSTOPPABLE:** Former NIDA head John Clark, who has returned to his home state to direct *Hollow Ground* for the Old Nick Company.

# World his stage

**T**HE Old Nick Company says that with the Pope's visit, a production of *Hollow Ground* couldn't be more apropos. But is the play, written by Nick Parsons, actually about child sex

abuse by priests?

"That's for me to know and the audience to find out," says the play's director John Clark.

"There is more to child abuse than sexual abuse, and often the parents' behaviour can have just as destructive an effect as physical interference."

Clark, who retired as the head of NIDA in 2004 after 35 years in the job, has come back to his home state to direct *Hollow Ground* for the Old Nick.

He was lured partly out of fellowship to the Old Nick, of which he is a life member.

But he is also hugely enthusiastic about the play — one of three possibles he suggested to Old Nick for the company's diamond anniversary year.

"It is one of the most interesting plays written in Australia in the last 10 years," Clark says.

"It touches on priestly celibacy and responsibility. The great thing about it is it's a very interesting story."

"It poses moral issues rather than sexual ones. There are no goodies and baddies, it doesn't preach and it's quite funny."

"It's not a howling comedy but it extracts fun from its characters. Bernard Shaw knew if you want to get something serious over in theatre, you make the audience laugh."

The story is about a priest whose parish is close to an area like Kings Cross, with its prostitutes, drug addicts and low lifes.

A woman dying of a terminal disease has made the priest promise, before she will accept last rites, to take care of her 12-year-old daughter, who is running wild.

"He's a man of honour and sets out to look after her but discovers she has probably been sexually abused by her stepfather, who is about to be released from Long Bay Jail and is likely to get



**applaud**  
GABRIELLE RISH

custody of her," Clark explains. "So the priest decides to adopt her, which causes a problem with the Church. The stepfather also genuinely loves the girl."

"It's a thin line between love and abuse — that's one of the things the play is about."

One thing you miss when reading Clark's reported words is that while he's saying them, his face, body and voice are amplifying his intelligent utterances — and a stream of irreverent and unprintable asides and anecdotes — into a theatrical performance in itself.

He would make a brave showing on the section of ABC TV's *The Gruen Factor* where advertising execs are asked to come up with ways of selling the impossible.

Yes, Clark has successfully sold the concept of a play about child abuse making a great night out.

He has been involved in the project since the audition and is brimming with enthusiasm for his cast of nine.

Among them is Andrew Casey as the priest and 18-year-old Kendelle Sidebottom as the 12-year-old Shelley. "A 12-year-old wouldn't have been appropriate for the part, for all sorts of reasons," Clark says of her casting.

In fact, no one under 15 will be admitted to see the play.

Clark reaches into his briefcase and draws out a recent edition of *Quadrant* containing an article about the sexualisation of young girls in girls' magazines and advertising.

He also flourishes a bound copy of the *Hollow Ground* script and points to the words on the cover: "23rd draft".

"One scene I thought needed more explanation and he sent down two new pages," says Clark approvingly of Parsons, praising him as a rare Australian playwright who will revise work.

"Australia is full of half-written plays which, if properly pushed into shape, could be huge international hits," he says.

Clark himself has been getting about on the international stage since retiring, at the age of 72, as NIDA's director.

He came to wintry Hobart straight from tropical Singapore, where he directed a play based upon Ovid's *Metamorphosis* for one of Singapore's (surprising) three drama schools.

"Singapore is putting more money into education and inspiration," Clark says of the former nose-to-the-grindstone nation.

A previous production performed in Mandarin

at the same drama school led to Clark being invited to the Shanghai Theatre Academy to direct a performance of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.

As with Singapore, Clark found the Chinese attitude to culture has been shifting and liberalising.

"*Measure for Measure* is a play about sex and politics. It's about a duke who decides to control morality by closing down all the brothels and making sex before marriage a capital offence," he says.

"It was a very modern production and I was given lots of girls as actors, and there weren't enough parts for them, so we ended up with lots of prostitutes and two policewomen dressed in Shanghai police uniform, who told the audience where to sit and to switch off their mobile phones and not to laugh because it was a very serious play."

## Yes, Clark has successfully sold the concept of a play about child abuse making a great night out

"After the dress rehearsal, I was asked by the director of the school to change the police costumes because he didn't want to offend the police. We just took off the badges, but there wasn't any trouble, and no one was arrested."

Clark has directed one or two plays a year since he retired, written a book about teaching Shakespeare and is preparing to write a book to coincide with NIDA's 50th anniversary next year.

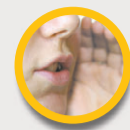
Despite his long and successful tenure as director of the Sydney-based drama institute, he says he was more than ready to leave when he did.

"The government regulations were getting more and more onerous, having to constantly justify to the government in reports and reviews what you had been doing successfully for 30 years."

Apparently, theatrical performances didn't count as 'performance indicators', nor the string of international stars NIDA continues to turn out.

"I'm just doing the fun bits now," Clark says of his fairly active retirement, which he is enjoying with his wife Henrietta, who was the executive producer of ABC's *Playschool* from its inception.

● **Hollow Ground will be on at the Peacock Theatre at 8pm from July 30-August 2 then August 5-9. Tickets \$25 (\$20 concession). Bookings through Centertainment.**



**hotGOSSIP**

►► Former *Dawson's Creek* star **Katie Holmes** will revisit her TV roots with a guest role on the series *Eli Stone*, which is about a lawyer (Jonny Lee Miller) who gains prophetic powers. In the episode, Holmes will display her singing and dancing skills. Before marrying and having a daughter with **Tom Cruise**, Holmes worked on films including *Batman Begins* and *Thank You for Smoking*. She's scheduled to make her Broadway debut in September in Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*.

►► Rolling Stones guitarist Ronnie Wood is back in rehab. "His close family and friends say he is seeking help and look forward to his recovery," Wood's spokeswoman says. Wood, 61, has fought a long battle with alcoholism during his rock 'n' roll career.

►► **Michael J. Fox** will return to series TV with a four-episode guest role on *Rescue Me*, which stars Denis Leary as firefighter Tommy Gavin. Fox's character, who uses a wheelchair, is the new boyfriend of Tommy's estranged wife Janet (Andrea Roth). Fox, 47, the star of TV's *Family Ties* and *Spin City* and the *Back to the Future* films, was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in 1991. He quit acting full-time in 2000 because of his symptoms but has acted sporadically in smaller roles, including a several-episode guest appearance in 2006 on *Boston Legal*.

►► One reason **Jessica Alba** named her baby daughter **Honor** was that she felt her own was pretty bland. "I was always irritated that my name was Jessica," the 27-year-old actor says. "It's a very '80s name, because there were tons of Jessicas in every school I went to. There's something

great about having a unique name. It's a part of your identity." She and husband Cash Warren welcomed Honor Marie Warren last month. "It's still amazing that she was living inside of Jessica," says Warren, who met Alba on the set of the 2005 film *The Fantastic Four*, on which he was a director's assistant.

►► **Ugly Betty's** love life may have just become a little less complicated. **Christopher Gorham**, who has played Betty's love interest Henry over the show's two seasons, has been cast in new TV series *Harper's Island*, which means he'll be departing *Ugly Betty*. *Harper's Island* is a horror series set on an island where guests at a wedding are being bumped off one by one. Gorham will play the groom, who is coincidentally also named Henry.

►► Grammy-winning singer **Natalie Cole** has been diagnosed with hepatitis C. Announcing her diagnosis, she said it was probably caused by her drug use years ago. Cole, 58, the daughter of jazz legend Nat King Cole, has sold millions of records over her long career.

►► New Zealand movie magnate **Peter Jackson**, of *Lord of the Rings* fame, is believed to have bought a \$17.35 million penthouse in Manhattan. The *New York Observer* reports that the names of Jackson's staff appeared in records tracking the purchase of the 10-room Tribeca duplex.

►► KISS bassist **Gene Simmons** (seen here with Aussie actor Peta Wilson) has parked his overactive tongue long enough to write a book. *Ladies of the Night* isn't some rock 'n' tell book from the sex-addled Simmons, though. He says it's a historical study of prostitution. "Put it on your coffee table, and let the guests in your house find the delicious subject by which to spend an evening talking about," says Simmons, 58, whose command of English continues to evolve.

**Madame Butterfly competition:** The winner of the *Madame Butterfly* prize pack is E. Porter of Blackmans Bay. The prize can be collected from the *Mercury's* Promotions Department during business hours this week.

## On show

**Until August 8:** Onaroll, an exhibition of pieces made from/inspired by toilet paper, curated by John Vella, at the Plimsoll Gallery, Centre for the Arts, Hunter St, Hobart, noon-5pm daily. Exhibitors include 1+2 Architecture, Eugene Carchesio, Steven Carson, Fiona Lee and Lucia Usmiani and Michael Schlitz.