

Theatre of adventure

Queensland Theatre Company artistic director Wesley Enoch takes audiences out of their comfort zone with a program of cultural adventure, writes Chris Herden



Libby Munro and Todd McDonald star in *Venus in Fur*

As Wesley Enoch looks forward to his third year as artistic director of Queensland Theatre Company (QTC), he is convinced the company's prosperous growth in 2012 was a sign that Brisbane theatre audiences are willing to shift out of their comfort zones and try out edgy new works. "We brought in a thousand new subscribers last year, realised a 13 per cent increase in box office revenue, and finished the year with a significant surplus," he says, adding that the 2013 box office is already 10 per cent ahead of what it was this time last year.

"Let's face it, people who come to the theatre are risk-takers, they're being adventurous by seeking out interesting stories and engaging in discussion and debate." And that's exactly what they will get from Enoch. Risk and adventure permeate QTC's opening production for 2013. *The Pitch* and *The China Incident*

(until 9 March) marks the first occasion these one-person plays by Australian playwright and actor Peter Houghton (Richie Benaud in *Howzat!*) have been paired as a double-bill.

"Peter Houghton is an actor's writer and *The Pitch* is a rough and ready piece that he wrote for himself and *The China Incident* he wrote for his wife, also an actor," says Enoch. Both works are manic and witty. In *The China Incident* Bea (Barbara Lowing) is a highly-strung diplomatic consultant and powerbroker who is on the verge of a breakdown. *The Pitch* is about Walter (Hugh Parker), a destitute screenwriter fixated on impressing a panel of powerful film producers.

After her show-stopping turn in 2012's *Bombshells*, Christen O'Leary plays Judy Garland in *End of the Rainbow* (from 2 March). Set in London's Ritz Hotel, the

former child star is a pill-popping mess, a victim of the dark side of fame. On the brink of financial ruin, Garland clutches at one last chance to stay in the spotlight and save her career.

Colin Friels plays American expressionist painter Mark Rothko in *Red* (from 27 April), a co-production with Melbourne Theatre Company and written by acclaimed screenwriter John Logan (*Aviator, Hugo, Skyfall*). *Red*, winner of six Tony Awards including Best Play 2010, looks at the period when Rothko's palette grew decidedly darker and he turned his art into a weapon against New York's corporate modernism.

Bertolt Brecht's epic morality tale about the ravages of war, *Mother Courage & Her Children* (from 25 May) gets a unique twist. Directed by Enoch and featuring an all-indigenous cast, this version of the play is set in a bleak post-

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apocalyptic desert where Mad Max would be at home. Enoch concedes that feedback from colleagues and artists suggests *Mother Courage* may be one of the company's biggest gambles yet.

"Sometimes we need to take these big risks because audiences are interested in different things to what artists are interested in. I love that the lead character in *Mother Courage* faces a moral dilemma - you make your money out of war but you think you are separate from it. One of the metaphors we are thinking around is mining and Aboriginal people being involved in mining - is it positive or negative?"

Venus in Fur (from 22 June) is based on an 1870 novella by Austrian author Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the man whose name and sexual inclinations inspired the term 'masochism'. In David Ives' contemporary version, an American playwright-director is convinced he will never find the right



Noel Coward's *Design for Living* will close the season

woman to play the beautiful, sexy and articulate mistress in his play. He gets more than he bargained for when in storms Vanda, a purring confident dominatrix.

"It has a bit of the *Fifty Shades of Grey*

kind of phenomenon about it," says Enoch. "There's something about those dark little secrets and *Venus in Fur* is like that, it tantalises and draws you in."

Robert Coleby stars in *Other Desert Cities*

(from 10 August) a fractious family saga set in the searing desert heat of Palm Springs.

The Noel Coward comedy *Design for Living* will be QTC's last production for the 2013 season (from 19 October) but already it is showing strong ticket sales. Just like the original play which starred Coward and a married couple, the QTC production will have Tama Matheson squaring off with husband-and-wife Brisbane actors Jason Klarwein and Kellie Lazarus.

"*Design for Living* has the charm and wit of Noel Coward but is often left aside because of the very touchy subject matter, the story of two men and a woman who basically love each other," says Enoch, who also directs.

When Coward tried to stage *Design for Living* in 1932, the risqué and convoluted three-way relationship of two men and a woman was deemed unacceptable to the London censor. But for Wesley Enoch in 2013, it's just another risk worth taking.

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