

Anyone but themselves

SARAH McNEILL

For years sisters Mandy and Hayley McElhinney waited for people to offer them the opportunity to work together. It never came.

Then during COVID lockdowns the two actors decided it was time.

“That little voice in your head going ‘maybe one day’ suddenly started screaming ‘if not now, when?’” said Hayley.

For the first time the

Perth-born sisters will share the stage in their own-devised debut play, *Dirty Birds*, a tragicomedy that blurs the line between truth and fiction, journeying through the past and present, real and absurd.

With Hayley in Perth and Mandy in Sydney during COVID lockdowns, they met once a week on Zoom, quickly discovering that the play each wanted to write was the same.

“It was really quite spooky,” Hayley said. “We would discover we’d both written the same scene or come up with the same image.”

Dirty Birds charts two women fighting for their own survival. They are a dysfunctional pair striving constantly to be anyone but themselves. But as their world begins to disintegrate, necessary change seems impossible. They play games, they play dress-ups and put on different personas, searching through memories and familiar rituals in a painful effort to move forward.

During the long period of isolation and no work, the two hard-working and highly acclaimed actors reflected on the joy they both felt in “stepping into another person’s shoes”.

Like so many others, they asked the question, if you don’t have a job to do, who are you? They agreed that “sometimes it feels excruciating to be yourself”.

“Spending so much time with yourself means you’ve got to find a way of being alone,” Mandy acknowledged.

Though the play isn’t



■ Mandy and Hayley McElhinney discovered they both wanted to write about pretending to be someone you’re not. Photo: Daniel Grant

autobiographical, its influences come both from their own sense of self-discovery and a childhood spent as itinerants living in a caravan up north with their Irish father and English mother. They lived a wild and free life of exploration and imagination.

With four years separating them, Mandy went to boarding school in Geraldton but what she brought home to Hayley was a passion for literature, for Shakespeare, poetry and the theatre.

Coming down to Perth

for high school was another form of isolation for the country girls, but they discovered new worlds of imagination through film and television.

“That contrast has shaped us and our sense of what home is,” said Hayley, “and that is what our characters are trying to figure out – where their home is; they are not at home with themselves, in their bodies or in their environment.”

In their debut comedy, Mandy and Hayley have created two characters trying to work out who

they are in a world obsessed with perfection. It’s about loneliness, and pretending to be something you’re not.

Hayley said: “They are floundering and dysfunctional, but if we can recognise ourselves in them, then hopefully the audience can. And it’s full of hope.”

■ Produced by Black Swan Theatre and directed by Kate Champion, *Dirty Birds* performs at State Theatre Centre from November 18 to December 10.

‘Indies’ feature high on arts awards

Independent

productions were the big winners on Monday night in the Performing Arts WA awards celebrating live performances across theatre, dance, musicals, opera and cabaret in 2022.

Independent dance show *Petrushka* (*Game, Set, Match*) by Scott Elstermann was the biggest winner for the night, taking out five of the six awards for which it was nominated, including Outstanding New Work, Choreography and Best Independent Production.

Zealous Productions’ *The Addams Family* picked up four awards and Blue Room Theatre took out three awards for three of its shows. Drew Anthony’s *Chicago* won best musical direction (Joe Louis Robinson and Joshua James Webb) and David Milroy won best new work for his

musical *Panawathi Girl* (Yirra Yaakin).

Co3 won best mainstage dance production for *Gloria*.

The surprise win of the evening was the Perth Festival show *The Smallest Stage*, which won best mainstage production against some of the bigger shows like *Mary Stuart* and *Oil*.

Black Swan Theatre won three awards for three productions – *City of Gold*, *Barracking for the Umpire* and *The Glass Menagerie*.

WA Opera was recognised for *La Traviata*, *Our Little Inventor* and *Tosca*.

The Lifetime Achievement Award went to two recipients this year. Choreographer Sue Peacock and musical director David King were each honoured for their long illustrious careers and dedication to teaching at the WA Academy of Performing Arts.

what's happening



Over *The Fence* returns for another season of mad, bad, unique, funny and strange films. OTF showcases 14 short comedy films from around the world with four screenings from Thursday November 9 to Sunday November 12 at the intimate *Backlot* cinema, 21 Simpson Street, West Perth. To book go to www.overthefence.com.au.

WA Youth Jazz Orchestra ends its 40th anniversary year with a free picnic this Sunday, November 5, in Hyde Park from 1 to 3.30pm, followed by a grand finale at *Quarry Amphitheatre*. On Saturday November 18, all three orchestras will gather

under the stars to play the Best of 2023. Artistic director Mace Francis said that after a year of major concerts, international guest artists and tours, the orchestras have never sounded better and they all look forward to playing their favourite repertoire.

Michael McCall, who won a best director award at the PAWA Awards this week for *The Addams Family*, describes his upcoming production of *Bertolt Brecht’s A Life of Galileo* as an eclectic mix of music, movement, song and performance. Translated by Mark Ravenhill, the drama will be performed by WAAPA’s second-year acting students from November 9 to 15 at



■ *The Nurses 2020* by Mikala Dwyer (fabric, plastic, paint).

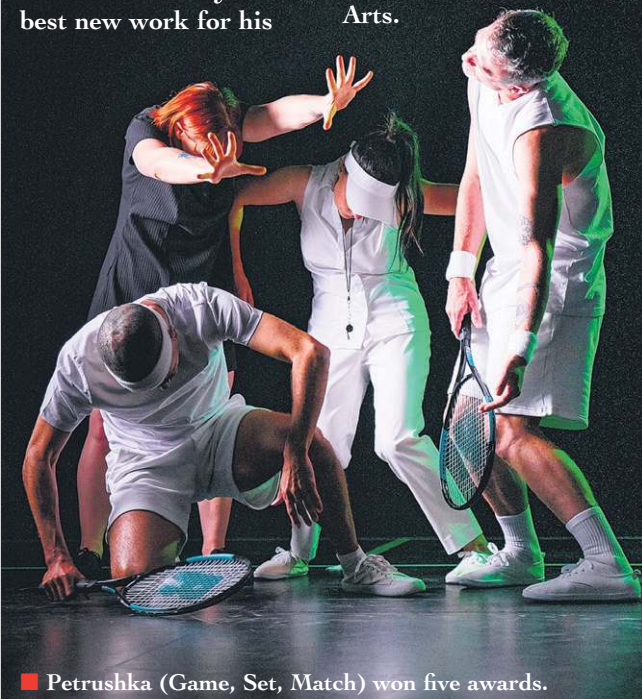
UWA’s *Dolphin Theatre*.

Fremantle Arts Centre’s exhibition manager Pete Volich described the major exhibition *Pliable Planes*

as “works which challenge and redefine the very essence of what textiles look like”. Part of the art centre’s 50th birthday celebration, *Pliable Planes* brings together 12 diverse textile and fibre artists from around the country experimenting with materials in painting, assemblage, sculpture, video, sound, and installation. It is on show until January 28.



■ Take a picnic to Hyde Park this Sunday to hear WAYJO.



■ *Petrushka* (*Game, Set, Match*) won five awards.