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THURSDAY, 25 JANUARY, 2018

PHONE: 5455 6946 | FACEBOOK.COM/NOOSATODAY | ISSUE 297

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John Howard plays Bruce in *Sorting out Rachel* with Chenoa Deemal who plays Tess.



EXCLUSIVE PREMIERE

BY MARGARET MACCOLL

Two days before the premiere in Sydney's Ensemble Theatre of his latest play, *Sorting out Rachel*, Australia's most successful playwright David Williamson and his wife, Kristin, writer, actor and former journalist, sat down with Noosa Today.

David's plays have engaged audiences for 47 years in theatres across Australia and internationally. The award-winning playwright has written plays in a variety of genres including his popular satirical comedies and numerous film scripts and television series.

After switching careers early in his adult life from engineering to psychology he revelled in the study of people's behavior which became an obsession in his early stage writing.

These days David said the couple's five children and 12 grandchildren keep him abreast of what is happening socially and in touch with reality.

I caught up with David and Kristin for coffee at Fratellini's at Sunshine Beach.

It was grandparent duty day and they arrived, like any grandparent, with a bag of snacks and activities on hand to entertain grandson Banjo who sat patiently while we chatted.

David was excited about the launch of *Sorting out Rachel* being performed by the Sydney Theatre Company at the

Ensemble Theatre. Once it completes its season in Sydney the production will travel to Noosa for four performances as a frontrunner and fundraiser for the Noosa Alive Festival. The festival, formerly known as the Noosa Long Weekend, was founded by David and Kristin and a band of dedicated friends, including violist and composer Brett Dean, restaurateur Leonie Palmer-Fisher and Noosa Parks Association president Michael Gloster. But the couple who remain patrons of the Noosa Alive almost didn't call Noosa home.

Moving to Noosa

It was a toss up between Noosa and Byron Bay when David and Kristin Williamson were looking for a beachside retreat from their Sydney home.

Noosa won out for its National Park, nice restaurants and a family history with the area.

"We used to come here with the children. It was like a fishing village. Barry's on the Beach used to have coconut prawns. It was quite wonderful," Kristin said.

The first time the couple visited Noosa was in 1975, all the caravan parks were full and there was no vacancy anywhere.

"We went to the one and only café in Hastings Street and asked the owner if he knew where we could stay.

"I've got an idea," he said. A surfer was away and his van was free.

"He won't be home tonight," he told us.

"About midnight there was a knock on the door and the

surfer was there. They explained what happened so he told them it was alright he'd find somewhere else.

"We thought it's so nice here. They're such lovely people."

When the couple moved to Sunshine Beach in the 1990s they thought "wouldn't it be nice if it had a festival".

"We thought we're living here, we should give back."

David said his son Rory who works in real estate regularly saw the result of people who didn't involve themselves in the community. They've got no friends and nothing to do. After a couple of years they sell and go home.

Noosa's Long Weekend Festival began with five friends who drew on their talents, the area's cultural input and their talented friends. Brett looked after the music, Leonie had the restaurants, Michael Gloster had wildlife walks, David the plays, I did books and we both did films," Kristin said.

"We have what we've still got now.

"We invited up a few mates like Bryan Brown, Tim Winton, cartoonists, artists.

"We said if you come up you'll have a lovely holiday in Noosa. They were all happy to come because they all loved Noosa. We told them if you come as a guest you have to mix with the people. They went out and rode surfboards and people got to know the artists. They were just mates.

"There was no staff. We did everything, tickets, the lot."

"The first year I went on stage with Kristin," David said.

My sons (both NIDA graduates) were in the audience as was Bryan Brown who realized what was happening and started laughing.



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David and Kristin Williamson at Sunshine Beach with grandson Banjo.

Pictures: DAVE GLEESON, surfshots.com.au

"They called me Westinghouse because I froze on stage."

David said Kristin was a wonderful actor and received great comments after the show. "The only thing they said about me was 'that's a nice suit'".

"We thought we'd only do it for one year. Then people started saying, that was great - of course you'll do it again," Kristin said.

The group knew to gain acceptance the festival needed to embrace the culture and the entire shire and hold events across both Noosa and the hinterland.

"The culture was here before us," David said.

"There was flourishing music society and a regional film society. We wanted to work with them not against them."

As the event took off people wanted to be part of it and they enlisted the help of volunteers.

"They were all local and they were just wonderful," Kristin said. "They still are. They have to be looked after. They're vital."

Kristin took charge for two years making a profit, David said. I did it for a year and made a loss.

The festival has now gained a big following.

"There's nothing like it in the country," David said.

Kristin said it had two guiding principles - to not alienate the local community who are always going to be its prime audience or price itself out of existence, and it had to be a multi-arts festival.

Sorting out Rachel

Over the years David's plays have reflected aspects of his life and family members would see themselves in them.

"(Actor) Robin Nevin used to come up to me and say I'm playing you again," Kristin said.

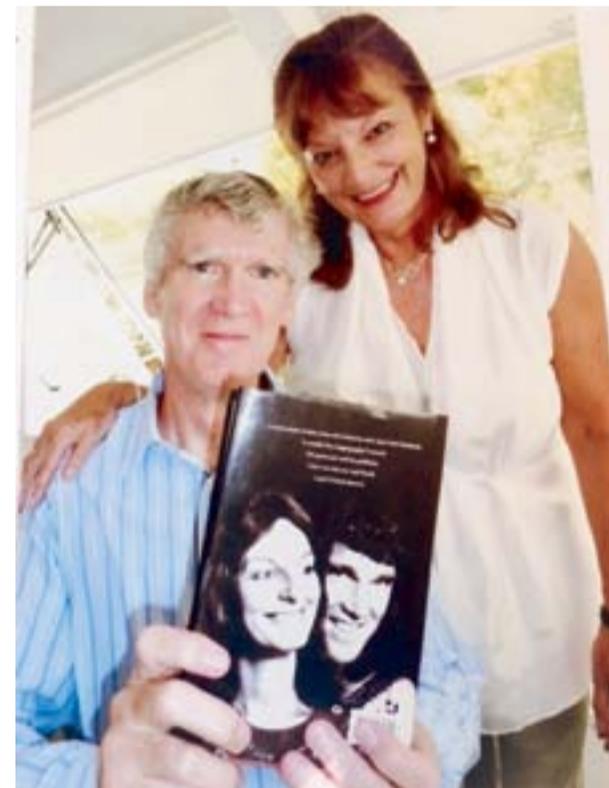
There is none of the family in *Sorting out Rachel*, David said, but the story does provide comment on family dynamics. *Sorting out Rachel* is about a grandfather, named Bruce played by John Howard, who gets fed up with the lax upbringing of his granddaughter and thinks he can do better than his daughter, but Rachel is a bit of a monster as some teenage girls can be, David said.

Granddad comes in to sort her out but Rachel doesn't want to be sorted out. In addition Bruce is harbouring a secret, called Tess, from the family and he is desperate to keep it.

"Bruce left a legacy, as sometimes happens, and that legacy wants to be acknowledged," David said.

Most of David's characters are not created with actors in mind but when David wrote Bruce he envisaged actor John Howard playing him. "I said if you can get John Howard that'd be perfect," he said.

Sorting out Rachel will be performed at The J Theatre from 21-23 March. Tickets \$57.50 (matinee) and \$62.50 (evenings). To book visit www.noosaalive.com.au, phone 5329 6560 or visit the theatre from 9am-5pm Monday to Friday. ●



David and Kristin Williamson showing their younger selves.

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