

in London. "She's marvellous," says Mackintosh. "When I went to Australia for the auditions, I didn't see anyone who was unique in their own right."

"I saw many talented people, but a lot of them had been doing pop musicals like *Wicked*, which is a different kind of singing and playing — really 'big' rather than the very precise way of acting and singing and the other-worldly quality Mary needs."

"I saw (Verity's audition tape) and thought: 'This girl's got something.' So I said: 'Let's fly her to Amsterdam' — we were doing *Mary Poppins* there — and when we saw her, we knew we'd

and that's a huge challenge when you're singing, dancing and acting as well as having to wear a corset."

"The costume is quite heavy too, so it takes a lot of stamina."

Composer **George Stiles**, who co-wrote the new songs for the show with lyricist **Anthony Drewe**, says: "Verity is stellar. She's quite simply one of the best there's ever been."

"She's very witty," says Drewe. "Some girls play it too stern and some are too soft, but Verity has really nailed it."

■ **Mary Poppins, Capitol Theatre. Bookings: Ticketmaster, 1300 558 878**



Verity Hunt-Ballard is truly enchanting as Mary Poppins

It will get you talking

NINA CONTI - TALK TO THE HAND
Sydney Opera House until May 1
★★★★☆

NINA Conti brings a sassy, modern twist to the age-old art of ventriloquism in her highly accomplished, very funny show *Talk to the Hand*.

Instead of the rather creepy, shiny-faced, wooden dummy we generally associate with ventriloquism, Conti begins her show with *Monkey*, a sardonic, profane puppet who interrogates audience members with foul-mouthed glee.

Together they create a narrative using suggestions from the audience and play a word association game. "You say a word and I'll say that first thing that comes into your head," instructs *Monkey*.

Throughout the show, Conti (the daughter of British actor **Tom Conti**)

reminds us that she is a ventriloquist, deconstructing and playing with the convention.

Other puppets include a high falutin' owl and a clairvoyant Scottish granny who pulls off a clever mind-reading trick and insists Conti sing a duet with her. Then there's the alcoholic *Lydia* with whom Conti swaps voices, trades accents and — in time-honoured tradition — chats while drinking a glass of vodka.



Nina's more than handy

One of the most hilarious moments is when she gets a couple of audience members on stage, fits them with masks and uses them as live dummies. After 10 years developing her act, Conti's craft is finely honed.

She also raises the bar for herself by throwing plenty of improvisation into the mix.

This will have you marvelling at Conti's skill and laughing along in a sharp, freewheeling, entertaining show.



A Russel Wong portrait of Robert Downey Jr

Star photo exhibit

HIGH-PROFILE Hollywood celebrity photographer **Russel Wong** has his first Australian exhibition as part of Sydney's *Head On Photo Festival*.

Alongside his commercial work, which includes film stills and fashion shoots, Singapore-born Wong takes fine-art landscape pictures.

"After shooting portraits for so long, the opportunity presented itself when I was taken to exotic locations in

China when I was working with directors **Zhang Yimou** and **Ang Lee**," Wong says.

The exhibition will showcase some of his celebrity portraits, including **Robert Downey Jr**, **Joan Chen** and **Jackie Chan**, as well as black-and-white landscapes shot during the making of the kung fu film *House Of Flying Daggers*.

■ **Conny Dietzschold Gallery, from Saturday to May 31; 9690 0215**

EXHIBITIONS

MARIONETTES

Acclaimed photo-artist **Samantha Everton** exhibits a series of domestic tableaux of women isolated at home pictured in moments of silent implosion. *Dickerson Gallery*, Woollahra until May 17. Info: 9363 3358.

JAPAN: KINGDOM OF CHARACTERS

Explore the world of Japanese anime and manga characters from 1950s to the present, the likes of *Astro Boy*, *Hello Kitty* and *Pokemon* among them. *Japan Foundation Gallery*, Chifley Square until May 28. Info: 8239 0055.

FESTIVALS

HOOPLA!

Darling Harbour's annual circus and street theatre festival runs today, tomorrow and Tuesday with free events during the day. Details: www.darlingharbour.com.

COMEDY

ROCKWIZ LIVE

Julia Zemiro and **Brian Nankervis** in a stage version of the popular SBS music-trivia quiz show, playing at the Sydney Comedy Festival. *Enmore Theatre*, Friday and Saturday. Bookings: 9020 6966 or www.sydneycomedyfest.com.au

MUSIC

VIENNA PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

Tickets go on sale on Thursday for two different concerts by one of the world's greatest orchestras, conducted by **Christoph Eschenbach**. *Concert Hall*, Sydney Opera House, October 5 and 7. Details and bookings: 9250 7777.

ROCK & REBUILD

Sir Bob Geldof, **Jon Stevens** and **Danielle Spencer** perform a concert to raise funds for the Red Cross to help victims of recent disasters. *Lyric Theatre*, Star City, May 1. Bookings: Ticketmaster, 136 100.

LAST NIGHT OF THE PROMS

The Sydney Symphony plays the best of royal wedding music in concerts either side of **Kate and Wills'** big day. Sydney Opera House *Concert Hall*, this Thursday and Saturday. Bookings: 9250 7777.

litsonj@sundaytelegraph.com.au