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Montana. "Roger was going to come fishing since the Who were touring and they had a night off. My next-door neighbour, an English guy, had guided [Barack] Obama to catch fish, and I asked him if he'd take Roger Daltrey as he'd confirmed and was definitely coming. He said, 'I didn't like the Who that much, I preferred the Stones.'" He pauses, sighs. "Anyway they cancelled the tour; Roger got pleurisy."

It's in the wilds (and assorted coffee shops) of Montana that Hall pens scripts for his acclaimed US-themed BBC4 documentaries, among them *Rich Hall's Continental Drifters*, *Rich Hall's The Dirty South* and *Rich Hall's You Can Go to Hell I'm Going to Texas*.

Before his recent British stand-up tour he spent a month stateside filming the rallies of Republican candidates for *How to Kill a President*, a BBC program to be screened in Britain in July. "It's about how shitty the job of US president is. Nobody talks about that."

As for his own political views, he's not writing Hillary Clinton off just yet, and reckons Donald Trump is no more a threat to the presidency than a Pauline Hanson or Nigel Farage: "These people dominate the media and change the course of conversation so that other politicians are forced to think about some answers."

He says he was shocked to discover that big-name candidates travelled with their own stooges, people they'd plant in the crowd to ask the same question at different rallies. An Iraqi war veteran wondering about benefits. A nine-year-old girl asking about education. "I'm looking at the other journalists in the press corps like, 'WTF?' They're like 'Yeah, and?' I realised I'm the naive idiot."

So, is live comedy more important than ever in these tougher times? Do we need the comedian as court jester, as the boy calling out the naked emperor, more than we have before?

"No," says Hall.

Nonetheless, it's stand-ups such as Hall who have the potential to make us think long after we've stopped belly laughing, who use wit and banter to provoke debate and opinions.

He will be doing all this and more on his forthcoming *3.10 to Humour* tour, which he says is nothing like the *3.10 to Humour* British tour, since *3.10 to Humour* is just a slightly clever title for whatever collection of stuff he feels like saying at the time. Whatever that is, he doesn't get tired of saying it.

"That's what I don't understand about myself." That quizzical look again. "Why is this still fun? If I was a really great basketball player I'd go and play basketball every day until my knees didn't work any more. Because that's what it is, fun."

He flashes a smile. "I get a kick out of doing comedy, simple as that."

Rich Hall performs at the Adelaide Fringe Festival from March 7, then Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne until April 4.

PREHISTORIC PERFORMERS

Simone Fox Koob mingles with Erth's dynamic puppets as the 'Broadway version' of *Dinosaur Zoo* comes to the Adelaide Festival

It is a fact universally omitted from palaeontology lessons, but the inside of an Australovenator — the 2m-long theropod that roamed earth 95 million years ago — resembles the cockpit of a fighter jet.

Granted, the dinosaur this writer is able to peek inside is a puppet, and a hi-tech one at that. In a muggy warehouse space at the back of Sydney's Carriageworks, Scott Wright, director and founder of puppet theatre company Erth, is promising to impart the secrets of the art form by "dumping me in the deep end".

Crouched in the dimly lit Australovenator, an aluminium construction covered in a Lycra skin, which weighs about 40kg and stands more than 2m tall, I hear a voice from outside: "Give us a roar." I flick the neon switches above my head, grip the U-shaped steering wheel, put my mouth to the microphone and let loose. My stock-standard scream, too high to match the reptilian giant I am standing in, drops two octaves in translation and resonates around the room. I am puppeteer. Hear me roar.

Puppetry, specifically the no-strings-attached, tech-savvy version Erth has been developing since 1990, is enjoying a cultural renaissance. In theatre, the sophisticated engineering used to reimagine the stirring World War I tale of a soldier and his equine companion in the British National Theatre's production of *War Horse* has helped keep the production on stage for almost a decade, while Disney's musical adaptation of *The Lion King*, with its puppets roaming the African savanna, is Broadway's highest grossing production.

"Puppetry," as Wright puts it, "is the new black."

"The thing with puppetry is, it's — generally speaking — considered to be the realm of children," he says. "And I think adults are becoming a bit more enamoured by puppetry since it's sort of been given that opportunity to have a higher status within the arts realm."



PICTURES: HOLIE ADAMS

WE WERE THROWING RAW SAUSAGE MEAT AROUND. IT WAS REALLY RECKLESS

SCOTT WRIGHT

The international success of Erth's flagship production *Dinosaur Zoo* (originally *Dinosaur Petting Zoo*) testifies to this trend. The show opened in 2008, aiming to fill a gap in the market by combining the company's advanced mechanical puppetry with Australian palaeontology, and ended up on Broadway.

"What we wanted to do is talk about the pointy end of palaeontology and actually contribute to a child's experience of dinosaurs, rather than just going: 'Want a T. rex? Here's a T. rex'."

It hasn't stopped touring since its inception. The show arriving at the Adelaide Festival today, billed as the "Broadway version" of *Dinosaur Zoo*, is described by Wright as an up-scaled version of Erth's original show: "It was

just an easier way of saying *Dinosaur Zoo* pimped up."

During its New York season last year, the team filled a last-minute two-week spot at the New Victory Theatre on 42nd Street and sold out every show. It even attracted the children of Manhattan's elite. "Alicia Keys, Jerry Seinfeld, Sarah Jessica Parker; they all brought their kids. I was shitting myself thinking I was going to have to do comedy in front of Jerry Seinfeld, and then they were right in the front seats," says Wright, chuckling.

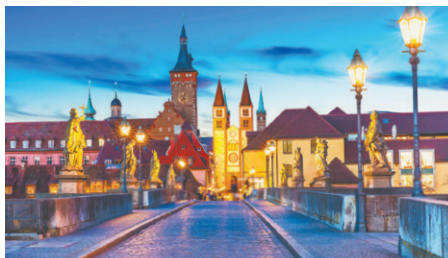
The Broadway version doubled the amount of dinosaurs and added US natives, such as T. rex and the triceratops, to mingle with their Australian counterparts. The show includes more dinosaur babies, which mew and gurgle, and interact with children during and after the show. Other additions, such as onstage cameras that examine the interior of a dinosaur's mouth when it has a toothache, have elevated that original palaeontological petting zoo.

"The very first show we ever did we were literally throwing raw sausage meat around, giving it to kids to throw at the dinosaurs. That was the very first time we ever did it, and it was really reckless," says Wright. "As something that started as a street show, it's evolved and become a show that's now touring the world."

He attributes the show's longevity to Erth's attention to detail and interest in palaeontology.



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