

Laughter the best medicine? Patrick Cornish investigates.

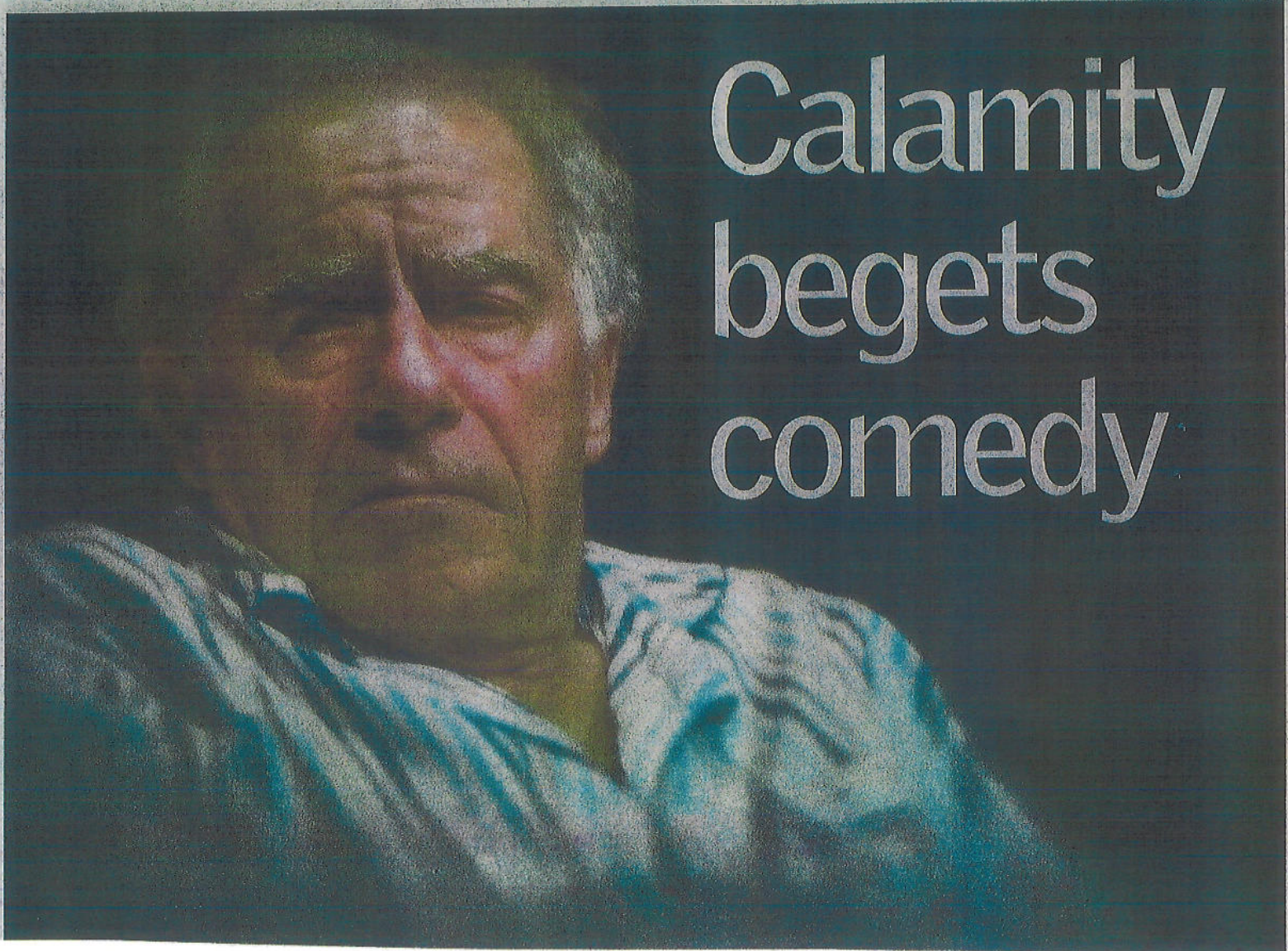
Public parts have always been comfortable ground for actor/playwright Alan Hopgood — playing a doctor in *Bellbird* on TV and writing the film *Alvin Purple*, for example.

It was private parts, however, that he was forced to focus on after his doctor mentioned two words that can plunge many men deep into their discomfort zone.

Prostate cancer

Hopgood, a role model for recovery both physical and emotional, not only came through the surgery 17 years ago. He got busy straight away, using his writing skills to dramatise various ills that men and women are heir to. Out of calamity came comedy.

This month he's bringing *Four Funerals in One Day* to the Octagon Theatre at the University of Western Australia. If you're wondering how anyone could make palliative care funny, consider that the play was co-written by a woman who styles herself the Deathtalker. Molly Carlile knows the territory well, having been a palliative nurse for decades and promoter of discussion about death.



Calamity begets comedy

In their play Hopgood — who turns 77 two weeks after the Perth performance — is Clarrie, wheelchair-bound and tired of living. He and a young nurse visit darkish places, conversationally, that many people avoid.

“What’s important is that we’re laughing not at such people, but with them,” the author tells me in a phone interview from his home in Melbourne.

“Through comedy we break down barriers and open up communication. The plays are first shown to medical professionals so we can check details and agree it’s OK to put the particular topic into stage comedy.

“I was in Perth early this year for my play *My Dog Has Stripes*, which is about depression, the ‘black dog’ as it’s often called.”

A typical evening in Hopgood Land offers a nourishing three-for-one deal for the heart and mind. First there’s the play. Next comes the open forum, which in Perth will be chaired by Carlile.

“Thirdly there’s a chance for a cup of tea, scone and a chat,” he says. Evaluation forms too. Being honoured in 2005 as a Member of the Order of Australia, for

Healthy approach: Alan Hopgood is raising awareness of health issues through theatre.

services to the performing arts and raising awareness of men’s health issues, didn’t stop him welcoming the opportunity to hear candid comments.

“The most interesting things come up in the forums,” says Hopgood. “When we took *Wicked Widows* to a Victorian country town a widower spoke up movingly. Since his wife died two months before he hadn’t discussed it with anyone.”

In 2011 there is widespread support for people suffering loss and/or physical trauma. At the University of NSW Lifestyle Clinic, for example, cancer recoverers can do weight training and cycling as well as attend group discussions.

Hopgood recalls that in 1994 he had no male to talk to, other than his doctor:

“During my 11 days in hospital

— men having prostate surgery today are usually out within three — I kept notes, with every encouragement from my surgeon, who said people needed to know about the experience. Including the night-time fears.”

From that came Hopgood’s book *Surviving Prostate Cancer* — One

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Man’s Journey and then a comic play, *For Better, For Worse*. He has spoken to men’s groups, and at conferences and seminars, all over Australia. After delegates have heard doctors giving earnest PowerPoint presentations and prescriptions on lifestyles, he lightens the mood with his “laughstyle clinic”.

He currently has eight health plays available, including ones on diabetes, dementia ... and geriatric sex.

Geriatric sex? “Alan,” I ask, “a little, but not too much, information, please.”

“Well, *Never Too Old* is about two men in a nursing home. One is

regularly. I’m telling you they go home with wide grins’.”

Always alert for new material, he asks empathetically about the sextuple bypass I had last year. My self-medicated humour included calling laborious moves towards the bathroom “shave shuffles”. I sang “corridor chorales” during escapes from the ward. A daily dose of Hopgood would have helped.

Four Funerals in One Day is presented in Perth as part of the 10th anniversary celebrations of the SolarisCare Foundation, which offers a holistic approach to helping cancer patients and their families/carers. Chief executive David Edwards says the head of research saw the play in Victoria and decided it was the perfect match for their birthday party. Book at BOCS. See solariscare.com.au.