

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, JON ENOCH



Nina Conti and her performing partner; below right, Doctor Brown with Stuart Bowden aka The Tiger

impulses of a nine-year-old boy, according to Wills: never mean, more interested in cowboys than he is in girls, more Keaton than Chaplin. Dr Brown is more deeply mischievous, more unsettling. "It wasn't contrived," Burgers says, "it's just what happens. I go on stage and practise some of the techniques that I picked up at school." He's been heckled at club gigs, "but I try to get the audience before they get me".

Burgers comes across as unconventional and questioning offstage as well as on. "With stand-up," he says, "you can be a prisoner to the laugh. But it's not all about the laughs and the gags. There's more freedom in fantasy. I'm just playing." Starting to think about what he does as a career, he says, risks destroying it.

You could have some terrific searching late-night conversations with Burgers, I suspect, though you might not want to be his manager. "I don't want to be a professional," he says. "I just want freedom." When he arrived in Australia this year he had no show. Then, slowly, he made himself one over four weeks of improvising onstage. The result was an award-winning hit. But it took three weeks of seriously bumpy gigs before it came together. Which must take some balls, I suggest. "It's not about balls," he says, "and it's not about success. It's about the inability to do it any other way."

Wills is the first to admit that the Boy is a less intense proposition than Dr Brown. "People think that we're quite similar," he says. "But he's doing the genuine improvisation: terrifying stuff! When I go on stage every action is carefully planned. Even with audience volunteers I've got a hundred different options for anything that might happen."

Being silent on stage is a relatively new thing for Wills. At circus school he majored in juggling and minored in clowning and acrobatics. He worked for six years in New Zealand under his own name, getting a reputation as a "props comic", while using his spare time to practise vaudeville routines he gleaned from old books and Google.

After six years of this he was getting tired of comedy when he decided to try out a silent character who would do some of the routines. On his first try he got a volunteer from the audience and found himself talking to her to avoid awkwardness. The next night he gaffer-taped his mouth shut to avoid temptation. A gimmick became a name became a



## The best of Edinburgh Fringe comedy

### Nick Helm

Unkempt, uncouth, unpredictable and one of the few truly captivating comedians to emerge in the past couple of years. After his regular, song-based slot on *Live at the Electric* on BBC Three, expectations are high for Helm's third show at the Fringe.

**Pleasance Courtyard** (0131-556 6550), Aug 1-27

### Mark Thomas: Bravo Figaro!

Strictly speaking a theatre rather than a stand-up show, this highly personal hour from the activist and

comedian Mark Thomas looks like a must-see. Thomas tells the story of putting on an opera in the living room of his music-loving father who has a degenerative disease.

**Traverse Theatre** (0131-228 1404), Aug 3-26

### DeAnne Smith

A second Fringe appearance for this deft Canadian comic, whose geek-chic look belies a sharp, inventive performer able to get good material out of both bikini waxes and white liberal guilt.

**Gilded Balloon Teviot** (0131-622 6552), Aug 1-27

### Eric's Tales of the Sea

Starting to become a Fringe perennial — but if you haven't seen this former submariner's tale of his life beneath the briny,

new career. "I never intended for this to get so big; this was a hobby."

The lack of language means that he can play all over the world. And if you want to call it all kids' stuff, well, fine. "My goal," says Wills, "is to make adults remember what it's like to be kids." Burgers calls it "putting into practice your silliness, your fun, your imagination, your stupidity."

Banks knows all about being silly but satirical, having spent five years as head writer on the smart kids' cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants*. He knows the discipline it takes, too. However warped Billy the Mime's topics, the execution always has to be spot on. "A parody of mime would work for, what, three minutes? I do it straight. Empty stage, white face, signs, classic Marceau style. I write my routines out in detail and then I video myself doing them over and over till I get them right. People say, 'Do you really need that outfit?' But there's a reason for all that stuff. It's not affectation. It's what has to be done."

**The Boy with Tape on His Face is at the Pleasance Courtyard, Edinburgh** (0131-556 6550), Aug 2-26. **Dr Brown (adult show) is at the Underbelly, Edinburgh** (020-7921 0788), Aug 2-26; **(kids' show) Assembly George Square, Edinburgh** (0131-623 3030), Aug 2-26; **Billy the Mime is at Just the Tonic at the Caves, Edinburgh** (0131-556 5375), Aug 2-26

## Poem of the day



### John Betjeman *Seaside Golf*

How straight it flew, how long it flew,

It clear'd the rutty track  
And soaring, disappeared from view

Beyond the bunker's back —  
A glorious, sailing, bounding drive  
The made me glad I was alive.  
And down the fairway, far along  
It glowed a lonely white;

I played an iron sure and strong  
And clipp'd it out of sight.  
And spite of grassy banks  
between  
I knew I'd find it on the green.  
And so I did. It lay content  
Two paces from the pin;  
A steady putt and then it went  
Oh, most securely in.

The very turf rejoiced to see  
That quite unprecedented three.  
Ah! seaweed smells from sandy  
caves

And thyme and mist in whiffs,  
In-coming tide, Atlantic waves  
Slapping the sunny cliffs,  
Lark song and sea sounds in  
the air

And splendour, splendour  
everywhere.

**Taken from *Winning Words: Inspiring Poems for Everyday Life* (Faber)**  
**Chosen and introduced by William Sieghart**  
**During the Olympics we are publishing a daily poem inspired by sport.**

get ready for something quietly wonderful. A brilliantly controlled hour with laughs and — why not? — tears.

**Just the Tonic at the Caves** (0131-556 5375), Aug 2-26

### The Pajama Men's Improv Show

No act has been more gloriously mind-bending over the past few Fringes, but this, it has to be said, is a risky proposition. The double act from Albuquerque junk their convoluted scripts to present their visual and verbal expertise in the raw, as it were (they're performing in mufti, too: no nightwear).

**Assembly George Square** (0131-623 3030), Aug 2-12

### Alan Davies

With six nights only at the

Fringe before an autumn tour, this is the *QI* regular's first stand-up tour in more than a decade. Topics he tackled on this show's first run in Australia last year included sex toys, fatherhood and his mother's early death.

**Venue 150 @ EICC** (0844 8471639), Aug 9-14

### Nina Conti

Her recent pair of documentaries for BBC Four were a superb combination of the revealing and the amusing. Can this new show from the ventriloquist, who has sidelined her regular right-hand creature Monkey in favour of new characters, cast the same spell?

**Pleasance Dome** (0131-556 6550), Aug 1-27

On the first anniversary of his mother's death in 1998, the actor Anthony Rapp was walking from Shaftesbury Avenue, where he was performing in the London production of the hit musical *Rent*, to his flat on the South Bank, "when I felt the rug pulled from under me". Rapp, raised in Joliet, Illinois, had been thinking about how much his mother Mary, who died of cancer aged 55, loved travelling and would have loved London. He sat by the Thames "and her death hit me like a truck. I cried and cried. I couldn't breathe. It felt like it would never end."

Now Rapp's solo show *Without You*, playing on the Edinburgh Fringe before transferring to the Menier Chocolate Factory in London, evokes her loss, as well as that of Rapp's friend, Jonathan Larson. *Rent*'s 35-year-old creator died from an aortic aneurysm before the musical, based on *La bohème* and set in the arty Lower East Side of New York in the Aids-shadowed 1980s, opened off-Broadway. *Without You*, based on Rapp's autobiographical memoir, folds words and music, including some famous *Rent* standards such as *Seasons of Love*. In Boston, where Rapp had performed to an enthusiastic audience — including a group of "Rent-heads", nearly all female, who applauded hard and queued patiently for autographs later — he seemed emotional.

He is handsome, reed-slim, with tufty strawberry-blond hair, looking a decade younger than his age, 40: the eternal indie kid. His voice cracks as he recalls performing in *Rent* with both his mother and Larson absent: a moment of personal success counterposed with tragedy. Doesn't *Without You* reawaken his grief? "Emotionally I didn't know if it would be overwhelming," Rapp admits. "But it's the opposite. The memories are joyful, painful, full of life and love. I don't feel their absence. I cry when I perform, it's cathartic. One of the central themes of the show is that 'the only way out is through.'"

Mother and son "really opened up" to one another as her death approached, the most significant exchanges concerning Rapp's coming out. When he was 14 she had discovered he was "fooling around" with a 17-year-old fellow high-school student. He came out to her "fully" at 18. "She was a nurse and mostly concerned about my health. She wasn't religious or thought there was something wrong with me. She had witnessed first-hand the shit going down with Aids and HIV.

"So we knew, from the earliest days, people who were sick or who died. I know some people's coming out stories are much worse than mine, but it wasn't easy. It was important, almost an obsession, that I had her blessing before she died and for her to acknowledge why I was publicly 'out.'"

The conversation "that made the biggest difference" came when his mother said that being gay was "no different than having blue or brown eyes"; afterwards Rapp felt "a tremendous sense of relief and completion".

Rapp's parents divorced when he

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, CHRISTOPHER LAINE



# 'When I perform I cry. It's cathartic'

## Anthony Rapp is back with a new show about life on stage and his mother's death, writes Tim Teeman

was two: "They didn't fight a lot but they weren't super-compatible." Brought up by his mother, he recalls, when he was 13, a friend at summer camp saying how much he loved Rapp's "normal" family life, which "seemed so foreign and mysterious". As a child he mounted puppet shows with chicken bones, knives and forks. He saw a tap dancer on TV and was mesmerised by the performer's exuberant expression.

Rapp began his acting career in 1981 at the age of 10 (in the Broadway flop *The Little Prince and the Aviator*). By 16 he had appeared in a play alongside Ed Harris and a movie, *Adventures in Babysitting*, a modern US classic. River Phoenix was his inspiration: "We were the same age, he was into every project he did."

*Rent* — which, after early readings and performances had its off-Broadway premiere in January 1996, the night after Larson's death — brought Rapp, who played the film-maker Mark Cohen, fame and

success. But afterwards he found "every door closed". He became depressed, which lifted when he got a part in the musical *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*. He knows that he "lost out" on two jobs because the directors identified him with Larson's musical, "but I think it's bullshit. *Rent* was a million times better than both those shows anyway. If I'm defined by it, so be it. It is a fulfilment of everything I built with Mom. She'd invested decades in helping make it possible."

Rapp reflects that his mother would have "probably been a little concerned" about him exposing their lives in *Without You*. As a girl she was "physically and emotionally abused" by her mother, who told her she wished she had never been born: "The fact she didn't revisit any of that on us is amazing. She vowed she would never treat us that way." He wonders whether and how Larson's musical career would have continued after *Rent*, "when he was at the height of his powers".

He has left some events out of the show, including

the unsupportive boyfriend he had when his mother died. His father Douglas's behaviour is also excised: Mary Rapp's dying wish was that Douglas would become closer to Anthony's older brother Adam (a playwright, to whom the actor is close) and his sister Anne, with whom Rapp has a more fractious relationship.

"Growing up, Adam was the star athlete, I was the actor and she was an ordinary kid. It goes up and down. I don't know if our relationship will ever be better than it is now."

Adam and Anne are three and four years older than Rapp, "so my father's departure was more scarring for them. I asked him if he was going to respect my mother's wishes. He got angry and railed about what his parents hadn't done for him. His behaviour makes me miss my mother more because he is never going to be a parent like she was. He's a nice, smart, interesting, sociable man but he's never going to be a father."

Rapp says, smiling, that the father of Michael Quadriño, his partner of three years, is "the father who would do anything for his family: supportive, kind and strong". Quadriño is 23 and Rapp has never been in a relationship with such a large age gap, "but I'm young at heart".

Turning 40 was "low key — it's bittersweet when you've lost someone close"; he only feels his age with "the odd twinge" of joints. It's "tough" being a 41-year-old actor, he says: "I don't look old enough to be a doctor. I had to grow a beard when I played a dad."

While he's in Edinburgh, *Born Blue* has its premiere in New York. It's a musical that Rapp has directed (and in which Quadriño stars) about women's lives at three key historical periods: the Salem witch trials, a black female slave who has an affair with her owner, and a Native American girl in the 1970s. Rapp is also preparing to appear in a musical alongside his former *Rent* co-star Idina Menzel (of *Wicked* fame) by the writers of the Broadway hit *Next to Normal*.

In Edinburgh he hopes that foreign producers see *Without You* so that he can tour the show, although not to cities where *Rent* is playing; because he uses some of the musical's songs, he cannot perform it if *Rent* is in town. After appearing in a 2009 revival he won't appear in *Rent* again ("I'm done") and has relished playing against type on TV: "It's good to play villains, although to appear in something like *Rent*, which you feel is so true, is special."

At the end of *Without You*, Rapp looks upwards to the "present spirit" of Larson and his mother (he doesn't believe in Heaven) and in sign language spells out "I, L, Y", pointing to his heart: "I love you." Rapp misses his mother the most because their relationship was deepening as he advanced into adulthood.

He smiles and says softly: "My brother once wrote in a play, 'Grief does not expire like a candle or the beacon of a lighthouse: it simply changes temperature.'" **Without You, August 1-26 at Underbelly, Edinburgh** (0131-226 0000); **Menier Chocolate Factory, London E1** (020-7378 1713), Aug 29-Sept 15

