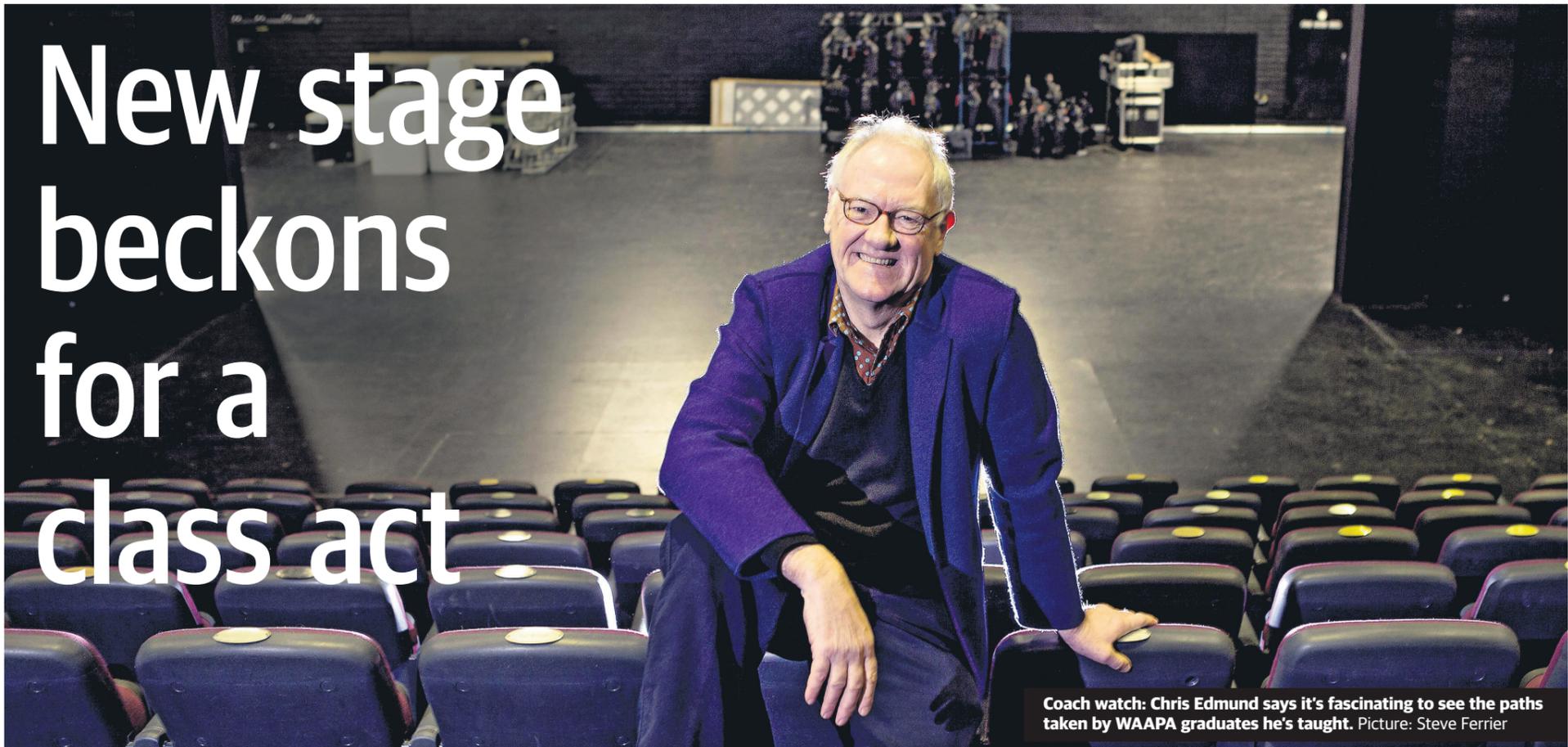


# New stage beckons for a class act



**Coach watch:** Chris Edmund says it's fascinating to see the paths taken by WAAPA graduates he's taught. Picture: Steve Ferrier

After setting many young actors on the road to stardom, Chris Edmund is exiting the WAAPA stage

■ Pip Christmass

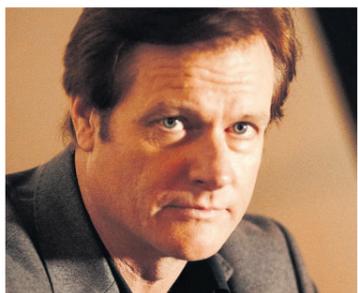


The days of commitment to one organisation, one line of work, may be disappearing faster than the average household's analogue television, but this hasn't been the case for Chris Edmund, the understated, quietly spoken head of acting at the West Australian Academy of Performing Arts. He's been teaching at this highly regarded star factory for three decades, helping the likes of Hugh Jackman, Frances O'Connor, Marcus Graham, William McInnes and new talent Jai Courtney to perfect their craft.

On the eve of his retirement, Edmund is in a reflective mood. He admits there have been many times when he has felt like a proud parent, watching as the best and brightest of his proteges have stepped forward into the bright lights of national and international acclaim. The talented young kids who trod the boards of WAAPA's theatres have gone on to shine on London's great theatre stages, Hollywood's most famous studios, and, closer to home, on countless beloved Australian television productions.

Now, after 30 years in the business, he's decided it's time to hang up his hat. But Edmund, who came to Perth from London via California in the early 1980s at the behest of WA theatre legends Nigel Rideout and Geoff Gibbs, isn't exactly about to start puffing on his pipe and pottering in the garden. This multi-tasking acting coach is also a painter and a playwright, and says there is still plenty of juice left in the creative tank. Retiring from WAAPA doesn't mean retiring from an active, engaged life.

"I'm going to do more painting and I've been commissioned to write and direct a play for the Gaiety School of Acting in Dublin next year, so I won't exactly be sitting around and playing golf," he says. "I just want to focus on



**Alumnus:** William McInnes



**Wolverine:** Hugh Jackman



**Graduate:** Marcus Graham



**Local:** Frances O'Connor

projects dear to my heart and develop some interesting work." Over the decades, Edmund has stayed in regular touch with his former students. Hugh Jackman, who trained at WAAPA in the early 90s, has not forgotten his roots, or the man who helped set him on the path to fame. Indeed, Jackman still regards his time living and studying in Perth as crucial to his development as a performer.

"He's (Edmund) going to be greatly missed because he changed so many people's lives," Jackman told *The West Australian's* film editor, Mark Naglazas, from London, where he was promoting his latest Wolverine movie. "There is not one job that I do when I'm not using one of the little pearls of wisdom that Chris gave us. He was a very quiet but very influential director, teacher and writer."

Edmund says: "It's important for me to keep in touch with our former students, and I think they like it as well, the idea that there's someone at WAAPA still worrying about them. Over the years our graduates go into lots of different areas — directing and writing as well as acting. It's always fascinating to see what direction they go in."

Edmund has seen WAAPA transform from relatively small beginnings to an acting course with a national and international reputation. He's contemplated writing its history but suggests it's perhaps too early to pen his memoirs.



**Hollywood:** Jai Courtney with Bruce Willis in *A Good Day to Die Hard*.



**Star quality:** Hugh Jackman in WAAPA's *The Season at Sarsaparilla* in 1994.

"I thought about writing an acting book, but there are already so many about — I'm not sure what else I could add," he says in typically humble fashion. "But I will have time to reflect now, I suppose, and I have seen so many changes. It's easy to say, for example, that theatre is in decline because more people are watching television or watching films on their laptops, but there is still an incredible power to live theatre."

He should know. When asked to name a couple of memorable moments, he cites a play he wrote about a decade ago, *The Devil's Tunic*. With its controversial religious themes, it created "an amazing fuss" in Perth.

"It was about the bloodline of Christ — this is well before Dan Brown and *The Da Vinci Code*, remember — and we had to hire extra security at the performances because people were breaking into the theatre and tearing posters off the walls," Edmund recalls. "There were genuine attempts to sabotage

the production. It certainly gave an edge to every evening. There'd be people in the foyer screaming and praying for my soul."

Another play, *The Butcher's Dance*, evoked similarly strong reactions, but for Edmund, this is the *raison d'être* of good theatre: a vehemently positive or negative reaction is always better than a lacklustre or indifferent one.

"When theatre is working, it's meant to be provocative," he says. "I've still got a letter from a school girl who wrote after having seen *The Butcher's Dance*; she'd been through some similar things to what was discussed in the play, and it's at those moments you think: 'Oh, actually, I'm making people better about themselves' or 'I'm helping people recognise they're not alone in the world'. It's those things I find incredibly touching."

Edmund's career started in London, directing for the likes of the Gate Theatre, Riverside Studios and New End Theatre, then he moved to California in the early

1980s, where he directed a number of productions for The Drama Studio at Berkeley. He made the move to Perth in 1985 after having met Rideout in California and Gibbs in London. Since then he has directed theatre and opera, written for stage and screen, worked in Singapore, Dublin, Hong Kong and Brazil, held exhibitions of his art and directed short films, all on top of his WAAPA role.

Edmund still genuinely believes in "star quality". He saw it in Jackman; he's seen it in new talent Jai Courtney, whose trajectory has taken him from WAAPA to Hollywood, where he has starred opposite Tom Cruise in *Jack Reacher* and Bruce Willis in *A Good Day to Die Hard*. He also cites James Mackay, winner of the 2013 Heath Ledger Fellowship, and Khan Chittendon (*Underbelly*, *Paper Giants*; *Magazine Wars*), who was "completely unformed and inexperienced" when he walked into his first acting class, "but he had that little bit of magic".

What WAAPA's acting course provides, says Edmund, is a way to bring out that magic and help actors work on their technique. "Fine acting doesn't just happen when the gods descend," he says. "You do actually have to refine and develop your craft."

As for Jackman, Edmund says he was someone who "used the course as well as anyone ever has".

"He came to WAAPA in his early 20s, knowing exactly what he wanted; I don't think there was a class he didn't commit to," Edmund says. "He had this incredible positive energy and a questing spirit, which he still retains. He's such a kind man, which must be so difficult to maintain in that world of Hollywood superstardom. The pressure that puts on people is incredible."

Theatre, Edmund adds, is a much less obvious route to public recognition, especially in Australia. "It's definitely a changing environment," he says. "At the moment that demand seems to be for film. But we still get people through who have strong ambitions for the theatre and we hope that continues. I guess one of the tragedies is that so many still need to leave Perth to sustain their careers. But I'm incredibly proud of what's been achieved at WAAPA. It's an extraordinary course that has had some quite extraordinary students come through."

**Chris Edmund in conversation with Angela Punch McGregor at Geoff Gibbs Theatre, Edith Cowan University, on August 2.**

**Tickets are \$20; bookings 9370 6895 or [waapa.ecu.edu.au](http://waapa.ecu.edu.au)**