



Come to Daddy

From suburban dads to big daddies, the Women's Circus dress in drag to take on fatherhood, writes **Jo Roberts**.

DONNA Jackson hadn't intended to return to the Women's Circus — she was just helping the board select a new artistic director.

"I hadn't thought about coming back to the circus," says Jackson of the organisation she founded in 1991. "I thought it was sort of like a relationship: once you leave, don't go back, it's gonna be ugly."

But as she sat on the interview panel, Jackson's mind began ticking over.

"I thought, 'God, this is such an exciting company,'" she says. "At the interviews, I thought, 'I'd

love to do a restructure, and then I'd do a show called *Daddy* and all the girls would be in drag talking about their fathers; that would be different for the Women's Circus'."

She put it to the board, and they agreed Jackson should return. She then had to ask the "community": the members of the circus. They agreed, and on Jackson's terms. "I said, 'But the show has to be funny. No more boo hoo hoo. I can't sit and watch any of that.'"

And so there are laughs a-plenty in the show that opens tomorrow night in Yarraville.

Daddy features about 45

women performing in drag, impersonating their own and other "daddies" in a show that features everything from a cock-rock band to swing dancing, from dancing sperm to the often priceless "dad" dancing.

In the past, with much of the circus' membership comprising survivors of sexual assault — a group that remains a priority for the company — the subject matter of shows was often heavy-going.

"Sexual abuse is still a really important issue, but, as a theatre-maker, my job is to entertain. It's to sell tickets, and to make ground-breaking feminist theatre," says Jackson. "And I think the most ground-breaking thing feminism could do at the moment is to get a sense of humour."

"With the past shows, every show that's been done has been done properly for that time in

history. But, because some of the women in the circus are survivors of sexual abuse, we don't need to limit them.

"Some of my friends may have entered the circus as survivors of sexual abuse, but they now want to talk about trapeze."

Jackson, 42, remained artistic director until 1996, when she decided she needed a break from "communicating with that many people"; to, in effect, run away from the circus.

She went to the other extreme and toured a one-woman show about her passion for cars and explosives, *Car Maintenance, Explosives and Love*, throughout Australia and Europe, from 1997 until 2002.

"I milked it, extensively," she grins.

She also worked for Regional Arts Victoria and, in 1998, was artistic director of the first Big West Festival (the Maribyrnong

Festival of People of Industry, as it was known then), of which the Women's Circus' annual show now forms a part.

Last year, Jackson also worked as an artist-in-residence at the Queensland University of Technology where she met artist Lynne Kent, whose bold shadow work features prominently in *Daddy*.

"It's great to use the idea of shadow with the idea of 'daddy,'" says Jackson. "For some of us, our father is a memory, or he may be older, or a shadow of himself, or he may be gone, or you may have never known him, or you may be living in his shadow."

The show explores all sorts of "daddies", from cast members' parents to the world's "big daddies", whether they be seen as protectors or perpetrators of cultures of fear. Our own "daddy protector", Prime Minister John

Howard, is portrayed as Mr Sheen.

"I'm just running it past our lawyers, to check whether it's seditious or not," says Jackson drily.

Despite the often heavy emotion associated with the word "daddy", Jackson says the show's message is positive.

"Some of our members have great dads.

"I think that's working against this culture of fear and trying to show there is goodness in the world. That's the challenge right now, about trying to get people to feel empowered and confident."

Daddy, by the Women's Circus, previews tonight and opens tomorrow at Kindred Rehearsal Studios, cnr Whitehall and Harris streets, Yarraville, 8pm, Thursday to Saturday; and matinees at 2pm Saturdays, until December 3. Phone bookings: 9685 5111.

Life's a circus: Donna Jackson returned to the Women's Circus to mount its latest show, *Daddy*.

PICTURE: DREW RYAN