

New trim Mardi Gras ready to strut its stuff

The great gay parade is rising from last year's financial disaster, write Andrew Stevenson and Amanda Morgan.

This year's Mardi Gras is like the dream of an ageing queen - stripped of all those rolls of fat and ready to prance down Oxford Street, trim, taut and terrific once more.

That's the dream anyway. In three weeks time, Sydney will find out if its irreverent celebration of sexual difference can regain its vital energy for its 25th anniversary.

Burdened by grandiose excess and delusions of its own importance, Mardi Gras followed Ansett, HIH and One. Tel down the gurgler with debts of \$700,000 last August.

A rescue followed in October and, out of the bitter mire of failure and recriminations, a new team, with little money or direct experience, began working on a rebirth. Improbably, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras season was launched last night.

But all is not yet in order. At the parade's Erskineville nerve centre - a rent-free gift from the NSW Government until the end of March - stands a plain, grey filing cabinet. Once it held untold riches - the highest grade of glitter known to man.

Yesterday, however, the cupboard was bare.

Cutbacks are all very well but, warns a volunteer, Napoleon Le Rambouillet, a glitter-free parade just isn't on. "You've got to have priorities. You can't have Mardi Gras without paint and glitter."

Only 80 floats have been confirmed for the March 1 parade, well down on past year numbers of around 180.

This year's parade and festival have been dramatically overhauled by the rescue team, known as New Mardi Gras.

The associated arts festival, which last year cost \$780,000 - and lost almost as much - has become a non-curated community festival being run for only \$5000.

Last year's rivers of gold paid a wages bill of around \$1 million. This year it's \$70,000, all to five staff on short-term contracts.

The after-parade party, still the Mardi Gras' cash cow, has



Marching back to life ... the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence get into the swing of things in Hyde Park last night, left, and John Byrne reads the float Vicki the Virus, below, for the parade. Photos: Edwina Pickles, Dallas Kilponen

Mardi Gras festival guide, galleries, video and archive at smh.com.au

been scaled back from the \$2 million it cost last year. This year's DJs will play for free.

In fact, says New Mardi Gras co-chair Michael Woodhouse, this year's festival and parade will depend on up to 2500 volunteers.

The financial crisis forced the change but Mr Woodhouse believes there are advantages in returning to community control.

"There's a huge amount of resources, energy and creativity within the community and that's actually come to the fore this year," he said. "We've had a large number of new people come up and say, 'I want to make Mardi Gras mine'. A lot of people value Mardi Gras immensely and they actually had a real scare when they realised it was all over."

Many in the gay community

have long supported moves to rein in spending. But how will cost cutting affect the grand parade down Oxford Street?

Co-chair Stevie Clayton admits this year might see less glitz and glamour compared to the last few. "But it will still be slick and professionally run," with an element of civil rights protest and political comment, Ms Clayton said. "The parade theme has an element of looking back to go forward. Where we have been in the past, where we are at now and where we are going in the future."

A former Mardi Gras president, Richard Cobden, acknowledges the challenge for the new team: "In some areas the Mardi Gras was a bit tired. The main thing they've got to overcome is apathy. I certainly

hope they have found the right staff to refresh it."

The president at the time, Julie Regan, is optimistic for a revival.

"Certainly I would wish them well because I know what it's like for it not to work and I would wish that on anyone," she said.

Mr Le Rambouillet, who marched in the first parade in 1978, also knows the ultimate joy of a successful parade.

"You can get out and protest and throw marbles under people's horses like the anti-globbalisation people and that just makes you look ugly," he said. "But a parade, a parade makes you look beautiful and unless you've been in one you don't know what a near-orgasmic experience it is."



FOCUS

Jago murder pleas

Two men accused of shooting Sydney rugby league player Jai Jago pleaded not guilty to his murder yesterday. An 18-year-old, who cannot be named for legal reasons, and Kadr Diab, 20, of Punchbowl, have been charged with killing the South Sydney player on April 26, 2001. The trial begins on July 14.

Drug program widens

The federal and state governments have announced a promising program designed to break offenders' drug-crime cycle will be extended across NSW. The Magistrates Early Referral Program, or MERIT, offers drug treatment as a voluntary option before sentencing.

McEnally case in court

One of the four men charged with murdering Senior Constable Glenn McEnally, Meli Lagi, 22, pleaded not guilty yesterday. His co-accused, Sione Penisini, 22, and brothers John, 23, and Motekiai Taufahema, 25, will enter pleas on March 7 in the NSW Supreme Court. Constable McEnally died eight days after he was shot in March 2002.

Two hurt in plane crash

Two men suffered serious burns yesterday when a light plane they were in crashed at Camden, south-west of Sydney, and burst into flames. One of the men was taken to Camden Hospital and medics were on standby last night to airlift him to Royal North Shore Hospital. The other man, believed to be 51 years old, was taken to Liverpool.

Fear of suicides

Australia's Afghan community fears more deaths of asylum seekers following a man's suicide in South Australia. A Catholic welfare agency, Centacare, said the man hanged himself on Monday. He was on a temporary protection visa, due to expire in April, the agency said.

Vitamin C court action

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission announced yesterday that it had launched Federal Court action against three of the largest foreign producers of vitamin C tablets. The ACCC claims the firms arranged to fix the global price of human vitamin C.