

# For the little critters

The award-winning picture book *Fox* is being brought to life in a humorous short opera for children, writes **Elissa Blake**.

**P**oor Magpie. Her wings were burnt in a bushfire. But riding atop her friend, one-eyed Dog, as he is running quickly through the scrub, she feels as if she's flying again.

"Fly, Dog, Fly! I will be your missing eye and you will be my wings," she sings. The two are inseparable. Until Fox arrives, promising a faster ride. Will Magpie leave Dog for Fox?

An award-winning Australian picture book by Margaret Wild and illustrator Ron Brooks, *Fox* is about to be realised as a tender and humorous short opera for children: a blend of music, puppetry, shadow play, movement and captivating animal costumes.

"We want it to be a wonderful

first experience in the theatre," the director, Kate Gaul, says. "It's an innocent story of friendship but it has big themes: courage, transformation, death, rescue, betrayal and survival. It's really the stuff of high art. But it's also lots and lots of fun."

Co-created by Monkey Baa Theatre for Young People and Siren Theatre Company, and pitched at children aged eight and older, *Fox* aims to capture the poetry of Wild's writing and the sumptuousness of Brooks's artwork.

"It's a very clever book that can be read on lots of levels," Gaul says. "Children really understand that someone can be your best friend one day and not the next."

Adapting it for the stage was a

challenge, Gaul says. The spare text and big themes seemed to demand an operatic treatment. To that end, Daryl Wallis has composed a haunting score and the story will be sung in its entirety by soprano Sarah Jones, who plays a character named Spirit who moves among the cast on stage but cannot influence the action.

"She's like a narrator who understands the cycle of life and death," Gaul says. "But the kids are going to embrace her as a girl in a pretty frock making a big sound."

"I trust children have open minds about things like opera."

Jane Phegan is Magpie, David Buckley is the loyal Dog and Jay Gallagher plays the lonely and mysterious Fox.



"They are dressed as animals but they are really very human," Gaul says. "They are archetypes of human behaviour. The adults will be able to read a lot into it but the kids will just be freaked out by Fox and fall in love with Magpie."

**Animal Instincts ... Jay Gallagher (Fox) and Jane Phegan (Magpie) rehearse for Fox.** Photo: Marco Del Grande

**FOX**  
April 10-17, various times,  
Seymour Centre. 9351 7940. \$18.