

MEDIA RELEASE

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**TOPO'S TRIUMPHS AND TRIBULATIONS EXPLORED IN
NEIL COLE PLAY**

The trials and tribulations of International Rugby Legend, Enrique “Topo” Rodriguez and his relationship with Alan Jones and Mark Ella, are explored in award-winning playwright, Neil Cole’s work, “**Topo the Play**” to premiere at the Seymour Centre on **Thursday 17 May 2007**.

Topo amassed an incredible, unequalled **Triple International Rugby Union** career of 42 test-matches (Argentina, Australia and Tahiti) before retiring in 1987. It was then that Topo faced the biggest challenge he had within his own life – mental illness.

Sponsored by the **Brain and Mind Research Institute**, the play is a keen insight into the effects of melancholia and depression on an otherwise high achieving and healthy person’s life.

All financial proceeds of “Topo” will be redirected to the Brain and Mind Research Institute and the Black Dog Institute, contributing towards the fight against Bipolar and Depression as well as youth suicide prevention.

Topo’s career included playing for Australia in the 1984 Grand Slam Tour of the United Kingdom and the play describes theatrically the relationship with his coach, Alan Jones and Aboriginal player, Mark Ella. While Ella was happy to retire early at the end of the tour, Topo continued playing. His depression was dormant while playing rugby. However, once he retired Topo became extremely ill with depressive episodes lasting continuously for 8 years before he was diagnosed with bipolar mood disorder.

In May 2006, Topo was approached by Victorian playwright Neil Cole, former member for Melbourne (Victorian Parliament) and a Bipolar Disorder sufferer himself. The result was “Topo the Play.”

“Topo the Play” is set initially in a mental hospital in 2005. Topo has just lost his taxi driver’s licence, doesn’t have much money and has been diagnosed with Bipolar disorder. His old coach, Alan Jones, comes to visit him and they begin to reflect on the 1984 Grand Slam victory of the Australian Rugby Union team. The contrasting lives and experiences of former champion team mate, Mark Ella and Topo are tightly intertwined as the play evolves. This leads back to where it all started and we see the relationship between the three protagonists developing. The obsessive coach and the equally obsessive champion player, with the laid back Ella are depicted in a comical fashion. The play traces the triumphs and tribulations of the coach and the players. Topo struggles really begin when he stops playing Rugby ... the coach still supports him

“Topo” is Neil Cole’s ninth full-length play. Neil won the Griffin Theatre Award for the best new writing for theatre in 1999 and was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award in 2001.

“Topo” features four characters: Topo Rodriguez, Mark Ella, Alan Jones and an Aboriginal bloke named Billy.

The season runs from **Thursday 17 May until Saturday 9 June 2007** at the Seymour Centre, Chippendale. Cost is \$ 32 Full Ticket; \$ 25 Concession and Group Bookings.

ENQUIRIES/INTERVIEWS

**Wendy Dreyfus (Coverage) on
9498 3001 / 0416 122070
dreyfus@pobox.com**

Background Information

ENRIQUE ‘TOPO’ RODRIGUEZ

“He is arguably the best front-row forward to have played for Australia”

Alan Jones

“He is everything Australians admire most in their sporting heroes, hard and unyielding on the field, modest and a bit of a larrikin off it.”

Time Magazine

“Without doubt Rugby has been to me, and continues to be the greatest University of Life.”

Enrique (Topo) Rodriguez

International Rugby Legend, business enthusiast, passionate patron of life, mental health and consumer advocate, community conscious and dedicated family man, Topo has always been life’s natural non-conformist. His life’s chapters include periods of pioneering the world’s scrum techniques with the Argentine Pumas in the 70’s and 80’s, moving his family across the world to settle in Australia, global success with the Wallabies and considerable personal challenges.

His career after rugby includes public speaking, motivational speaking, master of ceremonies, presenter, corporate and sports coaching and community activities. His inquisitive mind and hunger for knowledge has been the driving source of his achievements. Through the years he continues to focus himself on one of his passions in life, the ongoing development and progression of Rugby. He has authored a treatise in the rare and highly skilled “**Art of Scrumming,**” publishing a manual for coaches.

However, after his retirement in 1987, Topo faced the biggest challenge he ever had to confront within his own life. In 1996 he had to learn a whole “new ball game.” He lived with “bipolar mood disorder” undiagnosed suffering for eight years. Topo was treated, medicated and stabilized for the next seven years. However, at the end of 2003, after an extended episode of mania, he again fell into deep depression.

In January 2004, John Konrads' story, "**Sink or Swim**" in the Good Weekend Magazine encouraged Topo to seek a second opinion. He was then diagnosed for the second time and under a new treatment plan and strategy has learnt many key points for the management of this debilitating disorder. Amongst these lessons were:

- The need to overcome the "stigma" that surrounds Bipolar disorder.
- The importance of trusting friends and talking about the disorder with those people.
- The need to take control of his illness and not the other way around.
- The need for sufficient sleep and resting time.
- The need for regular ongoing professional monitoring.

Topo has learnt and is very conscious that Bipolar disorder does not discriminate and has become a fervent consumer advocate that enjoys sharing his experiences with community groups, in order to help as many Bipolar or other mental illness sufferers as possible. His particular focus is youth, hence arresting the incidence of suicide.

Topo continues to be involved with many organizations as an Ambassador and a Consumer Advocate. His associations include:

- Black Dog Institute (NSW)
- BeyondBlue (Vic) Ambassador
- Brain and Mind Research Institute (NSW)
- Rotary International
- Australian Rotary Health Research Fund
- Mental Health @ Work
- Orygen Youth Health

www.toporodriguez.com

NEIL COLE – PLAYWRIGHT

Neil Cole is Associate Professor in the Monash Medical School. Prior to joining APRC, Neil worked for five years at the Mental Health Research Institute as the Head of the Depression Awareness Research Project developing a model for effectively achieving depression awareness in the community. He also explored the links between creativity and mental illness in people with schizophrenia and has been researching that link at the Alfred Psychiatric Centre since 2005. This year a major project of research was undertaken into the “creativity link” called “Trilogy of the Mind” with a performance taking place at the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne using people with bipolar mood disorder and measuring the effect on their health from being involved in a high level creative pursuit.

Neil is a former lawyer, a member of the Victorian State Parliament for over a decade and in the 1990’s, the Victorian Shadow Attorney-General. Neil has had seven plays produced in Victoria, NSW and Queensland including: Alive at Williamstown Pier, A Policewoman’s Absurdity, Billy Possible, Dr Cade, The Campaign and Personality Games which he co-wrote with Professor Gordon Parker from the Black Dog Institute in Sydney. His more recent plays were The Trial of Adolf Eichmann and The Reunion.

His plays written and performed by and for people with mental illnesses include I Could Have Been Carmen, Radio Play, Depression: The Great Debate and Bring on the Carrots.

Neil is a passionate consumer advocate for many areas of mental health including speaking regularly in the community about depression.

**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ON MENTAL ILLNESS PLEASE
CONTACT:**

**Prof. Ian Hickie
Professor of Psychiatry and Executive Director
The Brain and Mind Research Institute (BMRI)
University of Sydney
Telephone Contact No.: 9351.0799
<ianh@med.usyd.edu.au>
www.bmri.org.au**

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