

# Time to put on the thinking cap



**A**llan Snyder has much in common with Woody Allen, whom he closely resembles. He's American, he's Jewish, he's energetic, imaginative, irrepressible, controversial (Oliver Sacks adds to the adjectives with "agile, playful, audacious and inventive") and, yes, he can be exasperating. Allan, like Woody, is totally focused on what goes on between the ears. But whereas Allen's preoccupations are with the personal neuroses he amplifies in comedy and film, Allan's interested in how our neurons and synapses work, what makes the brain tick and how it might be turbo-charged for additional creativity. One of the brighter people on the planet, Allan Snyder condemns "mindsets", insisting they blinder the perceptions of even major thinkers.

Profiled in *The Weekend Australian Magazine* last year, Snyder is director of the Centre for the Mind, which enjoys the support of two universities – the Australian National University and the University of Sydney – whence his brainwaves make metaphorical waves around the world. His speculations on intelligence, consciousness and creativity are gaining credence through imaginative research. His name pops up in the BBC Reith lectures and the work commands cover stories in *Nature* and *New Scientist* magazines.

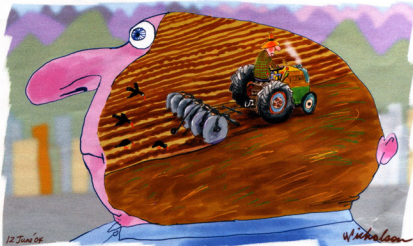
I spend a lot of time with Allan, trying to come to terms with what he's learning from the autistic, the savant, the child prodigy and the genius. For example, consider the mysterious computational skills of savants who, though barely able to dress themselves, can perform what seem to be arithmetical and

and geniuses – one of the more interesting arrays of people I've encountered – where the debate was nothing short of exhilarating. Particularly when Snyder insisted that it should be possible – without drugs, without surgery, without genetic modification – to increase anyone's or everyone's mental performance.

Usually Snyder wears a Greek fisherman's hat but, increasingly, he dons what's known at the centre as the Thinking Cap, which looks like a prop from a low-budget H.G. Wells movie. Snyder pops it on, with all its wires and dangly bits, and uses electrical stimuli to turn off some of his brain. Which, lo and behold, seems to turn other parts on –

releasing new energies. Having won the Australia Prize (more recently renamed the Prime Minister's Prize), established by Barry Jones, he went on to win the Marconi in New York, described as "the foremost prize in communication and information technology". Both awards recognised how Snyder's work had made the technology of fibre optics workable by, of all things, studying the way light is processed in the multifaceted eyes of insects. But while his mantelpiece grows beneath the weight of shiny statuettes, there remains a problem with the centre's funding.

Australia's corporations will happily back a sporting event, a rock concert or a horse race, but they're nonplussed by a centre of



## Australia's corporations will back a rock concert, a horse race or another sports event, but they're nonplussed by a centre of intellectual excellence.

mathematical miracles. Snyder suspects that most of us are born with these abilities – that every baby is, for a time, a savant. In other words, you may have *Rain Man's* Dustin Hoffman in your pram and pusher.

As I dimly understand it, these innate abilities are lost as the brain develops. It seems that losing these skills is the price we pay for a rounded, holistic intelligence. Snyder finds further evidence for his arguments in the paradox of autism where, for example, a child that can barely communicate with its own mother can instantly recall, note for note, an immensely complex piece of music; or, after a passing glance at the skyline of London or New York, can reproduce it in drawings of skill and beauty.

A couple of years ago, the centre ran a conference attended by savants, prodigies

producing in him and in others who've worn it a significant increase in creativity.

Needless to say, the Thinking Cap is causing considerable interest in people not a country mile from Microsoft or Sony, who envisage a consumer product that could leap the laptop and dominate the DVD.

The good Dr Sacks is just one of many notables who've been drawn to the centre. Another, Nelson Mandela, opened the conference, dubbed "What Makes a Champion?" Snyder had gathered together significant players in many categories of human activity, from sport to business via the arts, arguing that it should be a doddle to improve all forms of performance.

Yet the human mind isn't where his work started. Like all truly creative people, Snyder connects the apparently unconnected, thus

intellectual excellence. News Ltd (publishers of *The Weekend Australian Magazine*), through Lachlan Murdoch, was the first company to back the centre, but the breweries, the automotive industry and the banks have stayed away in droves. Perhaps our corporate leaders should put Snyder's Thinking Cap on. Then they might dimly perceive that tossing ideas around is more important than throwing balls.

To prove just how interesting the Centre for the Mind is, consider that it attracts the support of two people who disagree about everything else. I'm the chairman of the centre's advisory board. John Howard is our patron.

So if you're a tycoon with a lazy million – perhaps you've just cancelled a rugby league sponsorship – don't hesitate to call. ☺

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER NICHOLSON www.nicholsonart.com.au