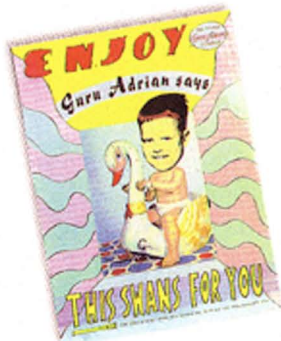


A job for the

GURU

Minor eccentric or major talent? David Art Wales, expatriate creator of cult character Guru Adrian, takes his jobs where he can find them. In New York, Alan Attwood takes the artist and the artist's substitute rabbit to do lunch at Robert De Niro's upscale restaurant.



IT IS EARLY IN HIS LUNCH AT NOBU, Robert De Niro's terribly trendy restaurant in New York's Tribeca, when David Art Wales reveals he has a hamster under the table. A hamster in a cardboard box, which he has in a plastic bag by his feet.

As Nobu is a Japanese restaurant noted for serving exotic items, often without cooking them, it seems safest to keep the hamster hidden.

It is after lunch, while we're crossing a road near the restaurant, that the hamster nearly escapes. Wales suddenly notices a hole in the plastic bag and a large, gnawed opening in one corner of the box. The hamster, one lusty leap from freedom, is looking out. Wales shrieks. This is no pet; this is a prop, part of a presentation Wales plans to make to executives of the Nickelodeon children's TV network. And now the prop is about to pop out and take its chances amid the traffic and pedestrians of lower Manhattan.

This is the way things tend to go with David Art (as in Arthur) Wales, whose cartoon creation Guru Adrian - "Pee Wee Herman meets the Dalai Lama" is how Wales describes him - became something of a cult figure in Australia in the mid-1980s. Things happen to him. Even lunch can be an adventure.

The 34-year-old Australian has been living in New York since the end of 1989. When lunch is suggested, a few days before we meet, he is enthusiastic. "Groovy!" he says. He is especially keen when it is clear he will not be paying.

He suggests a rendezvous at a place in Tribeca, which turns out to be closed. He then suggests Nobu, a few blocks away. The fact that it is (a) pricey and (b) very hard to get into does not concern him. Nor does the thought that neither of us is dressed for De Niro.

Wales leads the way into the busy restaurant. He

announces that, no, he does not have a reservation but would like to have lunch. The unflappable maître d' offers a table at the back, near the toilets. This, says Wales, will be fine. He is in Nobu. He has a table. And a hamster in a bag by his feet. (He had wanted a rabbit, but discovered at the pet shop that hamsters are cheaper.)

He orders a glass of white wine and the Chef's Selection lunch, one of the more expensive items on the menu. The waiter asks politely if he is allergic to anything. "Dust," Wales replies.

The purpose of the lunch is to discuss the many and various ways in which Wales makes a living in New York. His business card says simply: *The Most Professional Man In The World* - guaranteed to impress people, even if "professional" is misspelt. It's quite possible this is deliberate.

Wales is, quite literally, an odd-job man. "I am known among friends for my willingness to earn money by peculiar means," he says.

There is, for example, his nascent career as a manual pin-setter. He is the chap who rearranges the pins in the bowling alley of the Frick Collection, the prestigious art museum on Manhattan's Upper East Side. The Frick has two unmechanised lanes, dating back to 1913, in its sub-basement. They are the legacy of an era when bowling was considered an appropriate after-dinner recreation for gentlemen. Recently, the Frick's director, Samuel Sachs II, decided it would be nice if the lanes could be used again at museum functions. All the equipment was still there. But there was nobody to replace the pins after they were bowled over. Enter David Art Wales.

The way he tells it, a friend of the director spread the word downtown about the unusual, and very occasional, job going at the Frick. When a friend of Wales was asked if he knew anyone "loon enough to do it", he said he knew just the guy. And so Wales, who says he loves "olde worlde stuff", kitted himself out in Edwardian gear and, after-hours at the Frick, practised setting the pins and getting out of the way as quickly as possible. He made his debut in March at a party for patrons of the museum. It was, he says, "like wandering into a Peter Greenaway film: in a room with 10 gazillionaires, with candles and a gorgeous vaulted ceiling".

Apart from pin-setting, his recent endeavours include acting as master of ceremonies at a burlesque ("striptease without sleaze", he insists) in a restaurant called Flamingo East. He has also been an actor in a karaoke video and, much earlier, the operator of a mail-order flattery service (\$5 for a compliment). All of which are an extension of the entrepreneurial streak evident in the eight-year-old growing up in Castle Hill, in Sydney's north-west, who once sold individually wrapped cowpats as garden manure.

Munching happily on a succession of exquisitely presented dishes brought to him at Nobu, Wales insists: "What I do for money is not really what I do." The thing is, he says, "I'm more interested in what I want to do than what I need to do." Pondering this, he adds, "I want to do everything."

Wales is an artist. His works range from intriguing large-scale pieces using gold leaf that look rather like aged mirrors to small, quirky series that can be packed into a suitcase. He keeps these in his small apartment up five flights of stairs in the East Village, above a cafe and just a few doors along from a shop that offers body-piercing, tattoos and cappuccino. Inside his apartment, close to the entrance, is