

Mardi Gras still in rude good health

David Mills

MARRIAGE equality. Lifesavers in tight red Speedos. Lily Tomlin in a flowing, Joseph's Technicolour Dreamcoat-style rainbow cape.

As always, last Saturday's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras was a cavalcade of images and messages, some sexy, some silly and some serious.

Nearly 8500 people participated in the parade in 135 floats, while a crowd that organisers called "larger than expected" braved intermittent rain to view the spectacle.

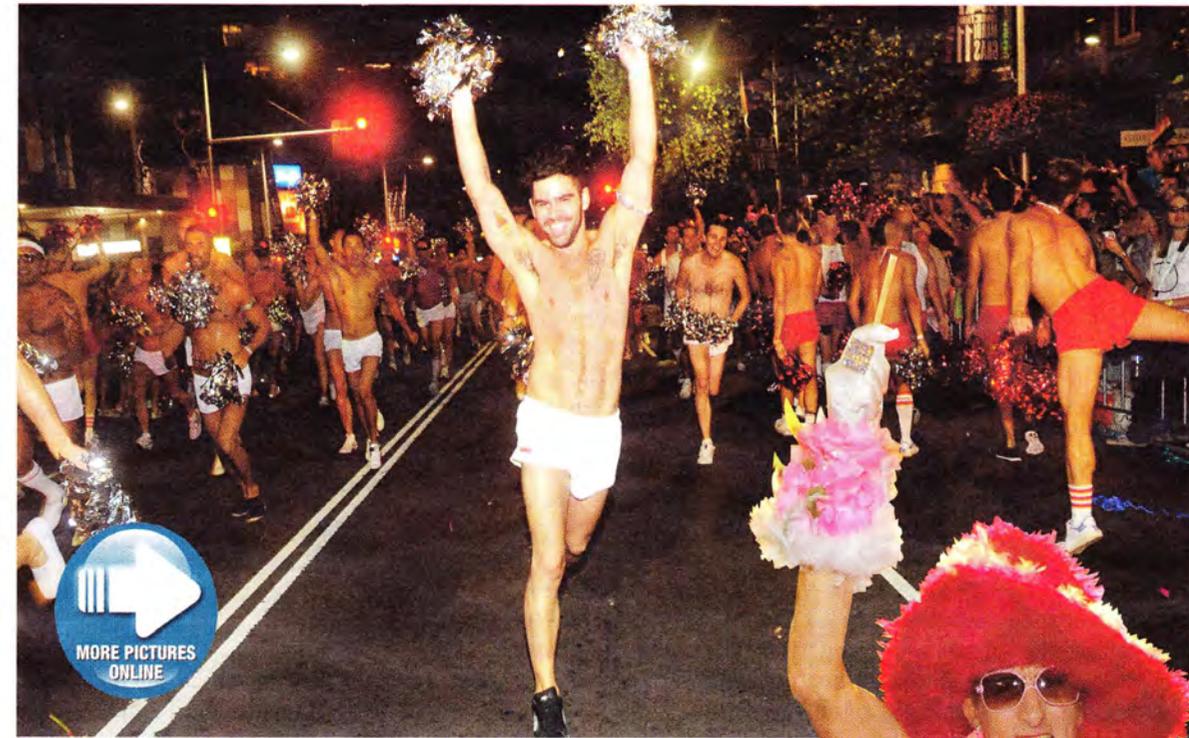
The parade was headed by a few gay and lesbian heroes, including Tomlin, and Melbourne schoolgirls Hannah Williams and Savannah Supski, who made headlines in 2010 when they protested against a same-sex "date ban" implemented at Hannah's school.

At the parade's other end were the Lifesavers with Pride, many of whom were drawn from eastern beaches clubs.

The group's artistic director, Jono Toh, described the event as "amazing", and because they were one of the last groups to march, he said "the excitement just kept building and building".

In a break with tradition, the lifesavers performed a large routine at Taylor Square on an impromptu stage, complete with a vocalist and confetti cannons.

"There's no doubt we will be back next year," Mr Toh



said. "The only question is: how can we beat ourselves?"

Similar comments came from Roy Freeman, president of the Jewish gay and lesbian organisation, Dayenu. The group has participated in every parade since 2000 (except 2006) and fielded 75 people this year.

The parade provided the group with valuable visibility, Mr Freeman said.

"Every year we get new members signing up, saying, 'We didn't know you existed'."

He said he was hoping to boost the parade group to more than 100 members next year.

A key theme of this year's Mardi Gras was the fight for gay marriage rights, with a total of 16 floats highlighting the issue.

Professor Kerryn Phelps, who participated in the Australian Marriage Equality Float with partner Jacqui Stricker, said they were both pleased to see New Mardi Gras's new focus on politics. "We feel that the marriage equality debate has reached a tipping point," she said. "It's not just a gay rights issue, it's a civil rights issue."

With almost 70 per cent of Australians supporting marriage equality, it was time for more politicians to take the issue seriously, Prof Phelps said.

Opinion: page 29



Lily Tomlin.
Pictures: JOHN APPELYARD

