

## **Barry Jones review of Anne Pender, *Seven Big Australians: Adventures with Comic Actors***

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*Seven Big Australians* was supported by a Future Fellowship awarded by the Australian Research Council, and the author/researcher Anne Pender is Professor of English and Theatre Studies at the University of New England. Her seven subjects, all interviewed at length, are Carol Raye (37 pages), Barry Humphries (34), Noeline Brown (29), Max Gillies (53), John Clarke (38), Tony Sheldon (46) and Denise Scott (35).

The chapter on Max Gillies is the longest, and probably the best, but the book is dedicated to John Clarke. I should declare an interest: Max Gillies and John Clarke are/were close friends. John, born in New Zealand in 1948, died suddenly while bird watching in the Grampians in April 2017.

Barry Humphries was a university contemporary of mine, a creator and performer of exceptional power. Many Barrys were born in the early 1930s but the name is now long out of fashion, having been replaced by Jason, Jayden, Tyler and Jack. It would be presumptuous to claim that I know him well, and he is both geographically and ideologically remote. But I recognise his genius. Humphries and Gillies, both born in Melbourne, were active in the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC; later Australian Broadcasting Corporation) radio program *The Argonauts Club*, a name that will be unfamiliar to anyone under 60.

I remember Carol Raye from the ABC's *The Mavis Bramston Show* and Channel Ten's *Number 96*, with Graham Kennedy, and in cameos in *SeaChange*. Born in England in 1923, originally a dancer, in Australia from 1964, she is the oldest of the seven. She was—and is—a very striking figure, with excellent timing and delivery. She took part in satires attacking the Vietnam War, Robert Menzies and Henry Bolte's hanging of Ronald Ryan. I doubt if she would consider herself as a comic actor. I was surprised to read of her close involvement with the Liberal Party and attempts to enter parliament.

Noeline Brown was a familiar figure from television—another *Bramston* star, and collaborator with Graham Kennedy—but also admired for her roles in plays by Alex Buzo and David Williamson, and in *Double Act* by Barry Creyton. She worked in the New Theatre in Sydney, starred in *The Naked Vicar Show*, first on radio, then adapted for television, and played the role of Florence Foster Jenkins, the eccentric

American singer. A Labor activist, she twice stood for parliament, was appointed as the first Ambassador for Ageing by Kevin Rudd in 2008 and commemorated on a postage stamp.

Tony Sheldon was unfamiliar because, unlike his parents Frank Sheldon and Toni Lamond, he eschewed television and film. I saw him only once on stage, as Bernadette in *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*.

Denise Scott, I am ashamed to admit, was just a name to me, but is apparently an extraordinary performer, working in a variety of forms, most with a dark edge.

I learned a good deal from Professor Pender's interviews and the book is a useful resource. Nevertheless, I found it extremely puzzling. She writes of her subjects that their lives are 'awe-inspiring, momentous and magical'. Really? That sets a very high bar. Her Introduction is preoccupied with the terms 'comic actors', 'comic forms' and 'comedy', but her profiles make no attempt to explain what was/is 'comic' about her subjects.

The chapter on Tony Sheldon was of particular interest because of its unfamiliarity. But his life story is full of trauma: exposed as a child to domestic violence, with a father who killed himself and a mother who tried, sexual traumas, alcohol and drugs. But the link between trauma and comedy is not explained. He achieved his first success as the tortured Arnold in *Torch Song*. He created the transgender role of Bernadette and performed it throughout the world more than 1,900 times (but not in the film). Is it really a comic role? Is Sheldon an awe-inspiring comic actor? I am open to persuasion, but Pender does not make the attempt.

Denise Scott's story is also dramatic, traumatic, powerful—but comic? She grew up in Greensborough, Victoria, suffered from anxiety, asthma, eczema and insomnia, was an unhappy teacher, then appeared in ABC television's *The Big Gig*. Her appearances as a stand-up performer were marked by her outbursts of rage and deeply hostile audiences. She worked with Judith Lucy in the show *Comedy is Not Pretty*, and the material was raw and painful rather than comic. Then she found her métier in one-woman shows *Number 26*, *Mother Bare*, *Regrets* and (with Judith Lucy again) *Disappointments*. All very dark and Scott attracted much hate mail on social media.

Max Gillies was born in 1941 and brought up in Caulfield. He abandoned religious instruction at the age of five. His father deserted when Max was eight and his mother developed paranoia, a subject that Pender handles deftly. His childhood heroes were Charlie Chaplin, Danny Kaye and Alec Guinness. He developed acting skills at Melbourne High School, then studied at Monash University, and became a specialist teacher. He had a hyperactive involvement with the Melbourne Theatre Company, Pram Factory, Melbourne Youth Theatre, La Mama and the Australian

Performing Group. He worked with Betty Burstall, Bill and Helen Garner, and Graeme Blundell. He first performed Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* under Elijah Moshinsky's direction in 1968 and last reprised it in 2018.

*The Gillies Report* began on ABC television in 1983 and among its writers were Don Watson, Peter Cook and John Clarke. 'Il Dismissale', a seven-minute segment in *The Gillies Report* was shown in September 1983, almost eight years after the event, and in the soap opera Gillies plays Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, John Kerr and the Queen. It is a tour de force and should be watched, immediately.<sup>1</sup>

Oddly, Pender does not mention the most notorious episode: Gillies's impersonation of Kerry Packer as 'The Goanna' in 1985. I don't find it amusing—it is terrifying. The sheer pressure of work led to an estrangement between Gillies and Clarke, but they had a mutual admiration.

Gillies's extraordinary impersonation of Bob Hawke was too close to the bone for the subject, although he claimed to take it in good part. Hawke good-naturedly (he thought) punched Gillies on the nose—but it hurt. Pender describes Gillies's contribution as 'magical and marvellous'. She scores a bull's-eye there.

Gillies, Clarke and Humphries shared a fascination for Beckett. Was Beckett a comic writer? Not to be evasive, but the answer is 'Yes' and 'No'. There can be explosions of embarrassed laughter from audiences in *Waiting for Godot*, *The Unnamable*, *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, but I doubt that Beckett can be treated as an Irish P. G. Wodehouse with a chuckle in every paragraph.

Clarke had a special affinity for three more Irish writers—Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne and Flann O'Brien—and also for the music of Schubert, largely because of the pauses: the notes that were *not* written. Both Gillies and Clarke were influenced by Alan Bennett and Peter Cook, brilliant writers and performers, but not essentially comics, and, in Bennett's case, remarkable for his empathy.

John Clarke's ABC television series *The Games* (1998, 2000) is described by Pender as 'comic drama'. I see them as social realism. His extraordinary series of short interviews for television, *Clarke and Dawe*, with his collaborator Bryan Dawe, were remarkable for their lack of theatrical artefacts: no make-up, masks, wigs, impersonations or funny voices, no jokes, no comic business. It was pure content and the viewer had to concentrate on every word. The series began on Channel 9 in 1989, then transferred to the ABC.

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<sup>1</sup> WhitlamDismissal.com, 'Il Dismissale: Max Gillies on the Dismissal', 1 September 1983, accessed 24 February 2021, whitlamdismissal.com/1983/09/01/il-dismissale-max-gillies.html.

He was an actor, writer and film producer, a generous spirit, constantly self-questioning, ardent birdwatcher, photographer and conservationist, devoted husband and father. He touched our lives and pricked our consciences, combining a genius for analysis and a mastery of language, puncturing political absurdity and pomposity through understatement, not exaggeration.

Both Gillies and Clarke were satirists rather than humorists but the distinction between humour and satire is never explored by Pender.

Barry Humphries was best known as the creator of Dame Edna Everage, Sir Les Patterson, Sandy Stone and Lance Boyle—all performed by himself—and for Barry McKenzie. But he is also a significant author and autobiographer who wrote or edited 23 books and collaborated in—or appeared in—many films, sometimes in character roles, often as narrator. He has worked with the Australian Chamber Orchestra and Meow-Meow on the music of Weimar Germany, on which he is an authority.

Pender writes: ‘Occasionally Humphries’ satire takes on the less forgiving, cruel and venomous satirical characteristics associated with Juvenalian satire. Like the Roman satirists, Humphries is a master of invective and uses denunciation, mockery, distortion, exaggeration, sarcasm and wit in order to arouse contempt, fear and mirth in his audience’ (pp. 55–56).

She concludes that ‘buried in his psyche was a sense of self-loathing’ (p. 38), a charge that Humphries rejects. I agree with him.

She sees Dame Edna’s gladdie waving as a ‘forgiving ritual’ (p. 56), a curious characterisation. I always saw a distinctly menacing element in the gladdie waving, demonstrating Humphries’s dark power over audiences. He was successful on stage in London, San Francisco and New York, won the James Joyce Award in 2009, received an AO and CBE, Fellowships and honorary degrees. Awe-inspiring? Well, yes. But comical? I am not so sure. Demonic, perhaps.

There are some odd slips—‘phased’ for ‘fazed’ (p. 169) and a comment that Bill Shorten changed his support from Julia Gillard to Kevin Rudd ‘less than a year later’ (p. 186). (The years were 2010 and 2013.) René, repeated, has a misplaced accent, and Laurence Olivier’s name is misspelled. An index would have been helpful.

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