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# Handling Edna

The Unauthorised Biography

Written by Barry Humphries

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# *Handling Edna*

The Unauthorised Biography



BARRY HUMPHRIES

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# 1

## *A Passion Play*

I wish I had never met Edna Everage. It happened at a time in my youth when many paths were open to me. I had barely left university (having failed to take a degree) but I was considered to be a person of promise and I believe that I could have pursued any number of artistic professions, that of a painter holding the strongest appeal. With a small group of waggish suburban subversives I had already held two exhibitions of paintings and ‘objects’ satirising, it is true, pretty standard targets like the late King of England, the Pope, Winston Churchill, and the Prime Minister of Australia, but they were demonstrations of a vigorous and even ferocious gift which I foolishly chose to set aside. Now, as my days grow shorter and the worms that will devour me have already

hatched, I wonder how I could ever have allowed one seemingly shy and uneducated woman to ruin my life.

The change in her personality from a painfully reticent young housewife, barely able to conduct a conversation, to a terrifying monster looming over her theatre audiences like a vulture disguised as a bird of paradise, and a woman whose advice is today sought by world leaders, and whose clothes are shamelessly copied by First Ladies the planet over, is a transformation I could never in my most extravagant dreams have imagined when first we met.

I wish that I had kept the postcard she sent me in June 1955 – fifty-four years ago! But why should I have kept it? What early scrap of which collectors now call ‘Ednabilia’ was worth preserving in those far-off days, before Fame unwisely smiled upon her? This was just a stage-struck young Melbourne mother writing to a young actor seeking his advice.

Her handwriting, if I recall, was studied but childish, as though painstakingly written by a girl frowning with concentration, tongue-tip protruding from the corner of her mouth. The fact that it was written in green ink with circles over the ‘i’s should have alerted me immediately to the serious danger of an ensuing correspondence. Had she been writing today she might well have concluded her letter with a smiley face, a sure sign of psychopathology. The card, which bore a rather bad, out-of-register reproduction of Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*, was probably purchased at the Primrose Potterie Shoppe in Little Collins Street, Melbourne’s foremost purveyor of artistic knick-knacks.

‘Dear Mr Humphrey,’ she had begun . . . Since the green ink had not alerted me to impending danger, my misspelt name should have been sufficiently premonitory. If only, then and there, I had chucked that postcard in the waste paper basket I might have changed the course of theatrical history, and liberated myself.

*Dear Mr Humphrey, you don't know me from a bar of soap, but  
I am a prematurely young housewife from the dress circle suburb  
of Moonee Ponds . . .*

Moonee Ponds was a drab working-class suburb on the ‘wrong side of the tracks’, as my mother would have described it. Originally the home of the Wurundjeri people, it has the only place name in Australia which combines an Aboriginal word with an English word. It was low lying and swampy and in no way deserved the fashionable fifties epithet ‘dress circle’, usually applied by estate agents to suburbs on higher ground and commanding panoramic views, or even ‘glimpses’. Many houses in Sydney are advertised as having ‘harbour glimpses’ and it is true that between forlorn trees and hideous apartment blocks can sometimes be discerned a two-centimetre strip of blue.

As for not knowing my correspondent ‘from a bar of soap’, I should inform some readers that there was a time in Australia’s history when soap was not the variously coloured and scented toiletry that it is now, but came in long tablets which were broken up into anonymous chunks. Even today I am

occasionally accosted by older ladies who challenge me with the same saponacious phrase.

The postcard continued:

*. . . I read a write-up about you in The Argus doing some of your skits at Melbourne Uni and I am desirous of teeing up a meeting because my girlfriends say I've got real talent . . .*

I paraphrase slightly but the enthusiasm, one might even say *chutzpah*, of this young woman's letter somehow engraved it in my memory, and in the light of what has happened since then it would certainly be of interest to the modern reader. I definitely remember her using the description 'teeing up', derived from the game of golf. It is an expression which took off like wildfire in the Melbourne of this distant age, filtering down from the middle classes who actually *played* golf to Edna Everage, who possibly had no idea where the phrase came from.

*. . . At the moment, although I have three young youngsters, my bridesmaid is babysitting while I am in a church production of a Passion Play playing the role of Mary Magdalene which is one of the leads along with God and Jesus. I am meant to be excellent though it is not for me to say. You can see it in The Holy Trinity Hall, behind the church, Puckle Street, Moonee Ponds until next Saturday. I look forward to meeting you. Yours truly, Edna Everage (Mrs)*

It is an unedifying confession but I was intrigued by this missive for snobbish reasons. Witnessing a suburban passion play starring my new correspondent would surely be one for the scrapbook and most likely enjoyed with the help of a handkerchief stuffed in my mouth. But why had this deluded creature sought *my* advice? Melbourne was teeming with actors far better known than I. There was Frank Thring for example, who was world famous in South Melbourne for his performances at the avant-garde Arrow Theatre. He had even been to that mysterious place called ‘Overseas’ to which all Australians were drawn like salmon to the spawning ground.

Frank Thring had even been in films with Laurence Olivier and lived, it was said, a rather *louche* life in Toorak – another Aboriginal place name, and indisputably a dress circle suburb. You could sometimes see him in person sauntering down the nicer end of Collins Street wearing a black turtleneck sweater, a silver chain medallion, corduroy ‘slacks’ and that incontrovertible proof of effeminacy: suede shoes. Could she not have written to Frank, or even Max Oldaker, the ageing matinee idol and star of so many Gilbert and Sullivan revivals? But I was probably slightly flattered to be singled out as a mentor by this silly person since my career had been so short; just a couple of student revues and a little flurry of publicity in *The Argus* and the *Sun News-Pictorial*.

I didn’t reply to Edna’s letter, but that evening I took myself down to Moonee Ponds on the tram which bore the euphonious name of this almost mythical suburb. There seemed to be a different type of person on this ill-omened tram ride, not at

all like the passengers on the Toorak tram, or on the Burwood, or on the Riversdale. There were men in greasy brown trilbies, open-necked shirts and fawn half-Norfolk jackets in cheap fabrics. They carried collapsed Gladstone bags from which, not seldom, issued the clink of beer bottles. In the open section of the tram I saw them rolling their own cigarettes, a generous pinch of Havelock ready-rubbed tobacco in a gnarled palm and a Boomerang cigarette paper fluttering from a cracked lip.

I had never been to this part of Melbourne before and for all my precocity in other things I had been quite unadventurous in exploring my own city. I was brought up in the new suburb of Camberwell in a two-storey Georgian house built in the mid-thirties by my recently prosperous father. It was a suburb which celebrated everything English. Many of the houses were in a mock Tudor style with imitation half-timbering. Pin oaks and liquid ambers flourished on the trim grass verges and the new gardens were invariably planted with phlox, ranunculi, zinnias and rhododendrons. In the early 1950s, weedy white-barked silver birches struggled for survival, but survive they did in this alien soil and can still be found, gnarled and deformed, on the front lawns of the now venerable cream brick villas.

The recent war had done little to change the tranquillity of our street though, for the duration of the war, windows had been pasted over with cellophane to protect us from bomb-blasted glass and some back gardens had been dug up to accommodate air raid shelters, which invariably filled up with khaki-coloured water. After the war the nicer Melbourne



suburbs quickly returned to normal; but for a while, there was still some horse-drawn traffic in the quiet streets – the Milkman, the Dustman and even the Bottle-o. The latter was a hunched figure in an old army greatcoat and a battered digger's slouch hat, whose hoarse ululation 'bottle-o' rang through the morning air, as curtains twitched and prim teetotallers peeped out to see how many empties an intemperate neighbour might be discarding. In working-class suburbs there was also the Iceman, serving households too poor to own a Frigidaire, and in remoter districts as yet unsewered, there was, we were told, a sinister nocturnal personage known as 'the Nightman' with his horse-drawn cart and its cloacal burden.

Melbourne was bisected by a class barrier as immutable as the *Limes Germanicus*, which the Romans constructed as a barrier against the unsubdued barbarian tribes. In Melbourne a corresponding boundary was the River Yarra. Nice people lived south of it. North of it, beyond the commercial centre, dwelt nobody we knew or wished to know. Bluntly expressed in sanitary terms, we flushed the toilet and they pulled the chain.

Now, on the tram to Moonee Ponds, I saw that other Melbourne where the Bottle-o would have trawled with greater success: parades of Victorian shops with wide awnings supported by cast-iron columns, bristling with what is now called 'signage' . . . *Four'n Twenty Pies*, *Cerebos Salt*, *Penfolds Wine*, and *Brooke's Lemos* – a giant Michelin Man made of lemons striding across a blue hoarding. Sometimes, even today, when an old building is demolished, briefly exposing the wall of its

neighbour, a hermetically preserved advertisement for that mysterious panacea *Dr Morse's Indian Roots Pills* is revealed in pristine condition, like the 50,000-year-old 'Bradshaw' paintings from the northern Kimberley, or the erotic frescoes of Herculaneum.

I alighted from the tram in Puckle Street and there, sure enough, but one hundred yards away, was a rather ugly red brick ecclesiastical building with a cluster of people outside. The women all wore floral dresses, hats and gloves, and the men, who were fewer, wore double-breasted wide-lapelled suits of a pre-war cut. No doubt they were all friends or family of the cast. I had arrived in the nick of time it seemed, and I joined the small crowd which filed down beside the church to the posterior hall, faithfully following signs which read 'Passion Play this way' like the Stations of the Cross.

From the hall came the shrill whinny of a reed organ, and on entering I was surprised to find it already quite full and furnished with extra pews and chairs to accommodate the overflow. It was an unseasonably warm evening in April and there was a strong odour of talcum powder, Faulding's Old English Lavender Water and, ever and anon, a sharp whiff of perspiration, for there were present a few recently arrived Italian parishioners who, by some accidental apostasy, had abandoned their traditional place of worship. They must have assumed that all roads led to Rome, even Puckle Street, Moonee Ponds.

A limp red curtain hung athwart the small stage and occasionally certain bumps and billowings indicated that behind it

vigorous preparations were taking place. The small but insistent organ stood on the left, close to where I had found the uncomfortable corner of a pew, and it was being pumped and manipulated by a large thyroid woman whose jowl and forelip were cocooned in fine grey hair. She seemed more interested in catching the eye of a friend in the audience than in striking even the most approximately correct note. As the lights convulsively dimmed, Miss Godkin, as I later learnt to be the organist's name, modulated from a sketchy rendition of 'Que Sera Sera' to a more devotional hymn. It was thus, to the tune of 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus', that the red curtain, after a few preliminary tugs, parted to reveal a bustling square in old Jerusalem.

If there was a rudimentary set I don't remember it now, but the stage swarmed with people and effective use had been made of bath towels, dressing gowns and burnt cork. Some of the older players threw themselves enthusiastically into the roles of beggars, rabbis and non-specific Arabs, but the younger actors often stood staring into the audience in search of their proud parents. I recall a Roman soldier in cardboard armour strutting onto the stage and bullying a crone which rather diverted our attention from the entrance of Jesus, impersonated by a young curate, the Reverend Tony Morphett, a handsome fellow resembling a distant relation of Leonardo DiCaprio. He was clad anachronistically in a toga, and behind his head, fixed to his ears with elastic bands (which had possibly been components of his parents' Fowlers Vacola fruit bottling equipment) was a large cardboard disc painted gold.

Unfortunately, at his first barely audible utterance, 'Peace be with you', one of the elastic bands sprang loose from its auricular mooring and for the rest of the performance Christ's halo flapped distractingly against his neck.

The production dragged on except for those moments, and they were many, when the principal players forgot their words and when Saint John's beard detached itself from his chin in the middle of a particularly moving affirmation of faith. Where was Edna? I wondered. Which one of those capering Arab urchins or veiled virgins could be my correspondent? The audience had grown a little restless and there was already quite a clatter of cups, saucers and plates as the Ladies Guild began to lay out supper on the lace-flanked trestle tables at the back of the hall. They were even chatting quite loudly as they deposited asparagus rolls, Velveeta sandwiches, cocktail frankfurters and butterfly cakes in readiness for the eschatological banquet to take place in the intermission.

At last there was a change of scene, or at least the announcement of one, as an Arab abruptly stepped forward to the footlights with a large sign which read:

## THE HOUSE OF SIMON THE LEPPER

Leprosy held at that time a powerful thrall over the inhabitants of Melbourne. A boat had recently arrived with a cargo of coconut which was impounded and destroyed because a Lascar seaman suffering from leprosy had been discovered on board. Desiccated coconut was the principal constituent of the Lam-

ington, Australia's indigenous cake, and it was also essential in the manufacture of Coconut Ice, the pink and white confectionery which every Australian child loved to make. Leprosy, that dreaded biblical infirmity, had dealt a death blow to two of the staples of the Australian diet.

An impressive leper (played, I learnt later, by an attractive Sunday School teacher) tottered around on her knees and then, gesticulating with ingenious three-fingered gloves, exhibited her malady to the great enjoyment of the audience. Notwithstanding, throughout this grim cameo she snorted with suppressed laughter at her own antics. She was presumably 'corpsing', as they say in showbiz circles.

Then Simon himself trundled on stage on something resembling a modern skateboard, wrapped in a blanket and wearing a turban which already threatened to unravel.

The warmth of the hall, the aroma of hot sausage rolls and the effluvium of talc and cologne was having a soporific effect and I may have nodded off for a few seconds, only to be jolted back to consciousness by the irruption to the stage of a striking personage. A tall, angular young woman in a scarlet and biblically inauthentic muu-muu delivered her opening line, drawn no doubt from some Apocrypha of her own:

'Christ, your feet look awful. Let me give them a bit of TLC.'

It was at once the worst and yet the most audible performance of the evening. The audience was suddenly galvanised by a presence on stage in sharp contrast to the drab, shuffling amateurs around her. However, the most conspicuous feature

of this shrill and gawky interloper was her hair, which was the colour of *wisteria floribunda*. This, presumably, was my correspondent Edna impersonating Mary Magdalene fifties-style. She marched purposefully across the stage and flung herself at the big brown feet of the Reverend Tony Morphett, who meanwhile discarded his halo.

‘Peace be with you,’ feebly intoned Christ. Apart from his barely perceptible speech about suffering little children earlier in the production he interposed that exhortation whenever there was a hiatus in the action. Edna retrieved from a string bag – yet another scriptural anachronism – a jar of Vick’s VapoRub, with which she generously embrocated Jesus’s pedal extremities. In a later grandiose account of this incident, ‘Dame’ Edna claimed that she employed a combination of Vick’s and Nivea Cream in lieu of the biblically correct spike-nard which, then as now, is not easily obtained at Melbourne pharmacies, but I can assure historians reading this eyewitness account that the unguent used by Edna–Magdalene was the much humbler emollient.

There was a gasp when, after a few brief and precocious attempts at amateur reflexology, she released her mauve chignon and proceeded to expunge the mentholated ointment from her Saviour’s feet. The audience watched in astonishment at this modern re-creation of such a celebrated New Testament episode, but the Reverend Tony Morphett was obviously very ticklish, for he writhed uncomfortably in his throne on the brink, one feared, of hysteria.

As Edna rose at length from her task, her hair matted and

viscid, Jesus stiffly raised his left arm and intoned, 'What this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her.'

Smirking rather inappropriately, Edna rose and curtsied to the assembled towels and blankets as the curtain twitched to a close.

There was a stampede to the supper tables. I realised that since this was only intermission, the audience needed to be well fed before the Crucifixion, an event I preferred to imagine. Slipping out of the hall I felt a tug on my sleeve and noticed a small, bird-like woman of indeterminate age at my side.

'Excuse I,' she said, 'are you Mr Humphrey?'

I nodded in affirmation.

'I'm Marjory Allsop, Edna's wee frind.' I realised I was being accosted by an inhabitant of the Commonwealth's most remote dominion. 'Wasn't she choice?'

I had forgotten this popular New Zealand epithet, but before I could agree or not, Mrs Allsop continued, 'I'm worried about her poor he-ah with all that muck in it. Are you staying for the Crucifixion? That's her wee big scene.'

I invented a later appointment but gave the woman my card. 'Please apologise and ask her to give me a ring.'

'But what did you *really* think of her?' pursued Edna's importunate friend.

I hesitated, seeking a form of words that would be at once encouraging yet truthful. 'Marvellous isn't the word,' I replied. As I hurried out to the lights of Puckle Street I imagined I could still hear Mrs Allsop's Kiwi lament, 'Her poor he-ah, her poor he-ah.'

Twenty minutes later and still on the tram, I realised that a rather silly triumphant smile remained on my lips. This woman was a 'natural', I thought. If I could hire her for next to nothing to appear in one of my satirical stage shows she would be hilarious, even if she only read the telephone directory. She was, in a sense, a 'primitive' like the American singer Florence Foster Jenkins, who used to rent Carnegie Hall and give recitals of famous songs and arias which she rendered with a profound seriousness and grotesque ineptitude before an audience convulsed with laughter. This Edna could be the Eliza Doolittle to my Henry Higgins.