

Life

Sunday

The Sunday Age Magazine

Is being a good dad
spoiling your career?
The sticky mix of
fatherhood and work

Strippers, sharks,
drag queens ... and
what else the world
thinks of Australia

Magic hands and hot legs:
Life as a body-part model



Rewind

1965

BARRY HUMPHRIES

Interview Louisa Deasey

The comedian recalls his first one-man show in Australia and how a suburban housewife named Edna Everage saved him from boredom.

This photo was taken at Melbourne Essendon Airport in 1965. I'd just returned from three years in England and I remember being very surprised at all the hoo-ha at the airport; I wasn't expecting it. I'd flown back to do a four-month tour of my first one-man show, *Excuse I*, at the Comedy Theatre. I'd never done a one-man show before and it was Clifford Hocking, a very clever young entrepreneur, who convinced me to do my first and he produced it, too.

In those days, any performer who flew in from overseas would be forced to do a press conference right there at the airport, straight off the plane. Many people got asked, "What do you think of Australia?" and it was always said with some hostility. I think Noel Coward said, "You have beautiful rooftops."

England had always beckoned me, as it did most Australians of my generation. As soon as we could afford it, we all flocked back to the Old Country. Somehow I'd known that if I could save up enough money, I would leave Melbourne forever.

My assaults on suburbia were my only defence against the creeping boredom that Melbourne in the '50s seemed to exude. It wasn't until after spending 18 months in Sydney with the Phillip Street Theatre that I realised how homesick I'd been for Melbourne and when I came back at that time [1958], I expanded the character of Mrs Everage and she started to directly harangue the audience. There were plenty of "angry young men" in my youth but they always seemed to blunt their attacks by being too serious.

I remember at one of my airport press conferences, a national television interviewer expressed a keen interest in the vocal technique that enabled me to perform Edna show after show. "Barry," he began, "isn't that fellatio tiring on your vocal cords?" I am sure the foreign word he sought to describe the required Edna sound was "falsetto".

My parents [Eric and Louisa] pressured me to do something more fiscally sound because it was important to them. My mother had a strong distrust of anything "artistic" and my father was a builder. They'd gone through the Depression and known a period of intense financial anxiety so I did feel a bit of pain that the very things I liked to do were bad news for them. Nevertheless, my education in the finer points of suburbia via my father's work provided a lot of artistic grist for the mill.

I only ever did things for fun and I still do. People often ask me if I meant to be still performing in my 70s [Humphries is 72] but I never consciously set out to plan what my career would be. You might call me irresponsible but I always did what amused me.



Fast forward

I invented Edna in 1956 and she's gone all across the world since then, even to Denmark. All my characters – from Dame Edna to Sandy Stone – were concocted in the '50s, well before this photo was taken. I wanted to write comedy about things I knew – the sort of people I knew in Melbourne, where I went to school and our neighbours. There were a lot of people like Sandy and Edna around then, looking forward to their retirement. I'm celebrating Edna's invention with my current show [*Back With A Vengeance!* is at Melbourne's State Theatre until February 11, with Sydney to follow in May]. People say, "Isn't it appalling, at his age?" but I have fun up there. That's the only reason I keep doing it. Don't you have fun when you watch it? I hope so.