Superstar housewife Dame Edna Everage has taken the US by storm on a hugely popular tour. Her alter-ego, Barry Humphries, has hidden behind the glasses and glitz for years, but here we enter the mind of Edna’s complex...
**Listen to their wistful cries. I will glance up at you from time to time. I will, I will ... (pause again) ... in strict proportion to the amount you’ve paid!” (Bang. Second blow.)**

The people in front of me are already shaking their heads in disbelief, while the woman behind is squealing with laughter, and an old man across the aisle is nodding vigorously into his breathing apparatus.

“I’m interested in the demographics of my audience,” Edna continues. “Who paid me the supreme compliment of getting a baby sit tonight?” A man from eight rows back volunteers, “Anne, the woman sitting next to him. Bad move.”

“How many kiddies?”

“Two.”

“Two? What are their names, Anne?”

“Rick and Rachel!”

“Don’t snap at me Anne! Who’s looking after them tonight, Anne?”

“A nanny.”

“Is your husband there with you, Anne?”

“Um ... ah ... no.”

Where is he?”

“Rick and Rachel!”

“Who’s looking after them tonight, Anne?”

“A nanny!”

“Does she live in with you, does she Anne?”

“It’s a he!”

“Christ, a 67-year-old Australain man is knocking them dead at the walls with laughter,” says David Bruson, Barry Humphries’ US assistant. “I think every stop has been bigger than Broadway ... and I’m thinking, ‘Christ, a 67-year-old Australian man is knocking them dead in Detroit and Denver.’”

For Barry, his triumphant sweep across this “intriguing and misunderstood” land is long overdue. In 1977, he brought his one-woman show Housewife/Superstar to New York where it played off-Broadway to favourable reviews – until the New York Times critic-of-the-day, Richard Eder, cast a withering eye over the show and killed it stone dead.

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him as a “club-footed father of five transferred from the paper’s Madrid desk to the position of drama critic”.

In the late ’30s, Barry – or at least Edna – returned with her own celebrity that show; she sat in a sauna with Mel Gibson; she flirted with Richard Gere; she argued with Chey Chas; she partied with Robin Williams; she danced with Rudolf Nureyev. She was the megastar celebrity – a study of tyrannical self-aggrandisement, as well as a satire on celebrity itself.

What was missing though, and what has always been an integral part of Edna’s phenomenal success in Australia and the UK, was the interplay between her and her live audience. This was where she was at her best, insulting, bullying, mocking and teasing her audience, as they’d never been mocked, bullied and teased before.

It’s easy to assume we know who Barry Humphries is and what he stands for. After all, he’s been poking fun at his country of birth for the better part of 46 years, with his gallery of monstrous and maddening characters: Edna, of course, Sandy Stone, Sir Les Patterson and Lance Boyle, to name but a few.

Perhaps the assumption is misplaced and now, more than at any other time given his US conquest, we may owe it to Barry – and maybe even to ourselves – to finally account for, and acknowledge, his unique place in Australia’s cultural firmament.

“I have always believed,” says writer and broadcaster Phillip Adams, “that Barry Humphries is the greatest cultural figure we have produced. With The Adven-
tures of Barry McKenzie which Adams produced and Barry created, he found the first mass audience for Australian films. He rediscovered Australia in the late ’50s and ’60s. He also happens to be the greatest manipulator of a live audience in our time. No one comes within a bull’s roar of him.”

John Lahr, the New Yorker’s theatre critic and one of Barry’s three biographers, goes even further, describing him as “one of the most prodigious comic talents” of the past century. “I don’t think Australia quite understands the tradition that he comes out of,” John says. “He has single-handedly brought the vaudeville tradition into the 21st century. And yet what he is (also) doing is performing a lifelong act of revenge which, of course, is the essence of good comedy.”

The revenge has many related targets: the “transcendental dullness” of ’50s and ’60s Melbourne and the blinkered complacency of the school system; the absurdities of suburban life and all its dogmas and safe assumptions; and, of course, his parents, Eric and Louisa, who brought him into the world through the portal of middle-class Camberwell, in February 1934.

His father, Eric, was a circumspect man and father, but you can’t go and really do that. So I suppose I tried to murder them. “I railed against [that] in this comic-strip invention of the 1960s and I was genuinely astonished when journalists said, ‘Well, is this someone in your fam-
ily?’ And I thought to myself, ‘Well, it’s sev-
eral people and certainly it’s something in which my mother’s influence partici-
pated. It was something to do with aunts. I think I once said that if England is the motherland and Germany the fatherland, then Aust-
ralia is the auntyland.’”

Edna’s last name was Everage, because she was average. She was married to Norm, because his was normal. “I invented Edna because I hated her,” Barry has said. “She was a silly, ignorant, self-satisfied, housewife. I suppose one grows up with a desire to murder one’s parents, but you can’t go and really do that. So I suppose I tried to murder them symbolically on stage. I poured out my hatred symbolically on the standards of the little people of their generation.”

From left: A young Barry Humphries with his sister in the 1940s; Edna when she was plain “Mrs” in the 1960s; Barry, second wife Rosalind and daughters Tessa and Emily in the ’70s.
It was also a way for Barry to control his mother’s judgement of him in the face of her palpable concerns. “The phrase commonly used by my mother (was) ‘We don’t know where Barry came from’, which I regarded as an indication that I might well have been adopted. It was also a cry for help from her because of the insanities I caused her.”

At the age of five, Louisa Humphries asked her son what he wanted to be. “A genius,” Little Barry replied.

At Melbourne Grammar, where his parents sent him despite his protests, the young Barry established his subversive credentials by wearing his hair long, writing in mauve ink and ostentatiously leaving a copy of Marx’s Communist Manifesto on his desk.

He hated sport and devised elaborate ruses for avoiding it. During foot ball matches, he could often be found sitting with his back to the playing field—knotting, “it wasn’t that I particularly enjoyed knitting, but that no one knitted. It wasn’t what you did at a boys’ school”.

He was nicknamed Queenie for his effeminate and bookish ways. By the time he was 13, he was already familiar with the writings of Salvador Dalí and the 19th-century French writers who inspired the Surrealist movement. He understood the Cubist painters and was close to approximating their style.

Almost single-handedly, he introduced the wild and subversive world of German Dadaism into post-war Australia, a philosophy which proclaimed that there was “no relation between thought and expression” and that no subject, least of all Dadaism, should “no relation between thought and expression”.

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Later, at Melbourne University, where he completed no courses and passed no exams, Barry became a legendary figure for his mania, completing no courses and passing no exams, and that no subject, least of all Dadaism, should “no relation between thought and expression”.

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HOOK LINE & SINKER

its earliest taste of Barry playing the role of sardonic pantomime dame. They went into raptures. “You could hear the whoosh of laughter,” Barry has said. “No one had really talked about Australian houses before.”

In 1966, Barry and Humphries released a record, "Wildlife in Suburbia," which had monologues from Sandy Stone – his satiric, lovelorn Beckett-like character – on the A-side, and from Edna Everage on the B-side.

“It was a landmark cultural experience,” says writer Richard Neville. “It was a shaft of light where it had never shone before.”

“Most Australian (comedy) had been a pretty old-fashioned Dad and Dave kind of stuff – and then suddenly you had this piercing, vicious, intellectual exposé of this country that we loved and hated but didn’t know why. It was the cleverest piece of piss-taking I’d ever heard. And then watching that little cult moment getting out into the world, going from Moonee Ponds to Broadway, well, that was just total genius.”

Edna Everage was supposed to be a one-night stand. Instead, she’s been around for 46 years. In the United Kingdom, she’s regarded as a theatrical phenomenon – the only solo act to fill the prestigious Theatre Royal since it opened for business in 1663.

She has had her own television talk show, opened Harrods sales, sung in the Royal Albert Hall, been put on display at the Royal since it opened for business in 1663.

The world is not going to be any richer or less rich because of us. We just analyse what they do. It’s just what we do. There’s no explanation for it. But on the whole, they’re what I look for. Remember, comedians never pretend or some grandiosity. Admittedly, my sense of humour fails me, as every comedian’s sense of humour fails them, in regard to myself. But on the whole, they’re what I look for. Remember, comedians never pretend or some grandiosity. Admittedly, my sense of humour fails me, as every comedian’s sense of humour fails them, in regard to myself. But on the whole, they’re what I look for.

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For your 4pm energy boost, Alex grabs a Lawan while Pops Apple Harvest Bar. With its love of shareability, this delicious, fruit-flavoured snack provides a source of dietary fibre, making their routines and daily activities easier. The range includes Apple, Strawberry & Apricot, with a source of plant or yoghurt protein. The plant bars are also few in fat!

celebrated English poet, Sir Stephen Spender. We knew that he had four children from his second and third marriages, Tessa, now 38, Emily, 36, Oscar, 20, Rupert, 19, and four grandchildren.

We knew, also, that alcohol had nearly destroyed him in the 1960s, but that after legendary bouts under tables, in the wrong people’s beds, in psychiatric hospitals, nursing homes and even prison on one occasion, he finally discovered that life was – and is – possible without the boozee.

But that, what we had were mainly assumptions, the most crucial one being that he apparently hated Australia, otherwise why would he satirise us so savagely, for so long? The other assumption being that he allowed his prejudices to live and breathe through his characters, and that, if you peeled away the layers of Edna Everage, you’d eventually come face-to-face with Barry Humphries himself.

When I meet Edna for the first time she has just finished pronouncing on the virtues of “mother’s spit” products to a Denver television audience, and to Kirk, their rather startled-looking show-business reporter.

“When you were little Kirk, and you fell over, did your mother lick her handkerchief to wipe your knees? Did she? Well, there’s something in mother’s spit. There’s an enzyme … and my mother is in a facility for old people. She’s very, very old and she’s now drooling … in commercially viable quantities. She’s yielding several barrels a day, and we’re harnessing this, and I’m making a whole range of mother’s spit products.

“We have the healing properties of that little wet hankie and I’m making bath gel, beautiful night cream, even a scent …”

After Edna has dispensed with poor Kirk, she takes me to her hotel room where, behind closed doors, she changes into a man in pants and a crumpled blue denim jacket. Barry Humphries appears a little worse for wear. He has a cold. He hasn’t slept well. He’s on a deadline to finish the second volume of his autobiography. He has a show tonight here in Denver and the set is still in flood-ravaged Houston. Unlike Edna, this 67-year-old man of culture and deep learning is too polite to send his interlocutor packing, and so he agrees, reluctantly, to join me in this charade of disclosure called the interview, where I begin by asking him what motivates his humour.

“I’m always looking for absurdity,” he replies, “or some pretension or some grandiosity. Admittedly, my sense of humour fails me, as every comedian’s sense of humour fails them, in regard to myself. But on the whole, they’re what I look for. Remember, comedians never analyse what they do. It’s just what we do. There’s no explanation for it. The world is not going to be any richer or less rich because of us. We just happen to do this thing. It’s a method of survival … I just found it was a very useful raft on which to cling to survive the ‘50s.”

But what about now? Do you find a kind of peace in the characters you play? Well, I do find peace in the character of Nicholas Pounder, who has already returned. I find the stage the most comfortable refuge there is … I find refuge from … from day I say it – people like you … please don’t take offence. I just find that when I’m on the stage, I have two and a half hours where the phone is not going to ring. I can tell them a story, really, in a funny way and I can have an interchange with a group of people who pay me the compliment of buying tickets. And that’s kind of what I do.

“I find the theatre a very interesting place – much more interesting than television or film, because people are used to go there. They have to turn off the television, get in a car, come into town, buy a meal, pay for a car park, come out of a coma and sit in some building consecrated to a communal purpose, to a sort of artistic purpose. This is an important act and in people …

“And to see them examine their lives suddenly? They look very shocked when you speak to them because they’ve used to being passive witnesses of entertainment, not participants. So when they’re asked to describe, for example, their house, they can’t remember what their house is like.”

“Maree darling, is your home detached? (Silence) You
and I might have a different perception of a detached home. Is it possible? Silence. Well, Maree, you go out the front door – are you with me? – and you turn sharp left, and you walk a few paces and then you turn sharp left again. And if you slam into a wall, then it isn't detached ... (Pause) Maree have you ever slammed into the wall? I mean that in a nice and caring way.'

Barry Humphries has said the characters inside him are people who allow him to siphon off aggression and discuss topics he would otherwise be loath to discuss in his own persona. Still, that's a far cry from asserting, as his biographer John Lahr does, that he and his characters are one and the same. "He is Dame Edna," Lahr told me. "That's the game he plays. Dame Edna is a comic reflection of Barry at any given moment, and so as he has changed, so has the character." I put this to Barry during a later conversation, although, if truth be known, it's Dame Edna I address, not his creator. Edna has just climbed into a limousine after a photo shoot for this story and is sitting at the back of the car, swigging on a bottle of wine, her legs spread and a red sequined dress pulled up around her crotch. From behind a canyon of hair, make-up and glasses, I then hear the unmistakable voice of Barry Humphries speaking: it is truly a spooky moment.

"Because you're not an actor," Barry says, "you don't quite understand that in order to do any character – Lear, Hamlet, John Howard – the actor has to find something of his character in himself. He has to find some attitude of his own that can link him to the character he is going to act, and then build on it."

Earlier in our discussions, when Barry was dressed – much to my relief I assert, as his biographer John Lahr does, that he and his characters are one and the same. "He is Dame Edna," Lahr told me. "That's the game he plays. Dame Edna is a comic reflection of Barry at any given moment, and so as he has changed, so has the character." I put this to Barry during a later conversation, although, if truth be known, it's Dame Edna I address, not his creator. Edna has just climbed into a limousine after a photo shoot for this story and is sitting at the back of the car, swigging on a bottle of wine, her legs spread and a red sequined dress pulled up around her crotch. From behind a canyon of hair, make-up and glasses, I then hear the unmistakable voice of Barry Humphries speaking: it is truly a spooky moment.

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