the life and death of Florence Broadhurst

Thirty years after her vicious and still unsolved murder, an enigmatic Australian has become an international trendsetter. David Leser looks at the fascinating and colourful life of wallpaper designer Florence Broadhurst.
time into the most successful wallpaper designer Australia had ever produced. Oh, and in between all this, she presented herself variously as a public speaker (sometimes true), a British singer (a blatant falsehood), a wealthy cattle heiress (a bold invention) and a friend of the Queen Mother (a complete whopper). Intrigued? Well, wait for it. In 1977, at the height of her fame, at the very time when she was commissions from companies such as Estee Lauder and Qantas, when chains of hotels in Saudi Arabia were asking for her designs, when rich clientele from Paris, London and New York were decorating their living rooms with her wallpapers, when the good ladies of Sydney and Melbourne were furnishing their homes with her signature designs, the 78-year-old dynamo was murdered in her studio in Paddington in Sydney.

It was a Saturday afternoon and she was king-hit nine times in the face, head, throat and sternum with a piece of wood. Police believe she knew her attacker, being thrown against the bathroom wall.

By the next morning, she was brain dead. Detectives believed the attacker was someone she knew, but perhaps just as chillingly, one of her many admirers. She had no enemies, only Florence Broadhurst. Anybody else was either a copier or a vagabond.

Diana Richardson recalled for the cameras a moment on that trip she will never forget. “One day while we were there, some of the stars found a Chinese fortune teller. Florence came out, having spent 10 minutes with this man, very tired. ‘I can’t believe it,’ she said. ‘He told me that within four months I would suffer the most shocking death.’”

Within four months of course, this terrible prediction had been fulfilled. On the day after the murder – October 16, 1977 – Diana Shaw had called upon Diana Richardson to tell her she had communicated with the dead woman through a seance. Diana Shaw said Florence had described how a man had come into the back of the factory and then through a louvre door. Her description of Florence’s studio space was accurate, even though she – Diana Shaw – had never been there.

Diana Shaw then told Diana Richardson that Florence had described the murder to her and asked her to relay a message to Diana [Richardson]. “I can’t get through to Diana [Richardson].” Florence told the spirit-visitor. “She’s too thick [to receive messages], so you must tell her to tell all my friends and loved ones I felt no pain. I did not suffer. The first blow stunned me and the second blow felled me.”

“IT IS NOT OFTEN an Australian woman becomes an international fashion brand, especially when she’s been dead for nearly 30 years. Yet that’s what Florence Broadhurst was achieving now – conjuring from the grave a new role for herself on the world stage. From Copenhagen, three Danish tycoons have recently ordered 74 rolls of Broadhurst-designed Japanese floral wallpaper to revamp one of the city’s hippest nightclubs. From Dubai have come orders for 60 rolls for a giant new shopping centre. In Los Angeles, the luxury club and hotel chain, Soho House, this year ordered Florence’s Japanese floral and peacock feather designs to dress up a venue for Oscar week. “We must have Broadhursts,” came the breathless request from one of Hollywood’s leading interior designers. The buzz is relentless. Turkish wholesalers have just ordered Broadhursts for new residential projects in Istanbul. And architects in Hong Kong have rolled out the wallpaper for new six-star serviced apartments. In the Colombian capital, Bogota, where the biggest shopping centre in South America is being built, the request has come in for Broadhurst patterns. Inquiries have come in from St Petersburg, even Tibet. In Shanghai, where nearly a century ago Florence performed under the name “Miss Bobby”, the famed Hollywood Bar nightclub has restored its own collection of Florence’s signature designs. In Melbourne on Southbank, in Sydney at Lotus Restaurant, Onqoe or Tank Nightclub, in London, Wellington, Seoul, Boston... the Broadhurst renaissance continues, with its trademark charming Indian pattern being known to every architect in Hong Kong. But make no mistake – this is Florence’s influence. As a wallpaper man, David’s instincts tell him to acquire something unique. What he is looking for is a designer who was not afraid to be himself. Florence had been all over the world looking for the right prints, but had returned empty-handed.

“Miss Bobby” performed in the world famous London nightclub with her electro beats and her colours, but the impact was short-lived. Florence performed under the name “Miss Bobby” for only seven years, during which time, she had played as a model and a fashion designer, as a film actress and as a female model. She had no time to build her own career, but she was one of the most influential women in the fashion industry. She was a designer who had a vision of fashion and who was able to bring the world together. She was a woman who had the courage to do things that were different.

Florence took no prisoners. There was only Florence Broadhurst. Anybody else was either a copier or a vagabond. I was a strong believer in Florence’s work. I thought she was a talented designer and a remarkable woman. I was proud to be associated with her and I was proud to sell her designs. I was proud to work with her. I was proud to be part of her legacy. I was proud to be a part of her story. Florence was a visionary, a realist, a dreamer, a fighter, a winner, a little bit of everything. Florence was a woman who made a difference. Florence was a woman who changed the world.

“The Sydney Morning Herald” on Florence Broadhurst
Above: “Granny Killer” John Glover (far left) in 1993. Author Helen O’Neill makes a strong claim that he murdered Florence.

Katherine Thompson is a multi-award-winning playwright and screenwriter whose television writing credits include some of Australia’s most gripping dramas – BlackJack, All Saints, McLeod’s Daughters, Wildside and Halifax F.P. – to name but a few. She knows a good story when she sees one, especially a good detective story.

In 2004, Gillian Armstrong, the highly regarded film director, approached her about collaborating on a documentary about the long-dead wallpaper designer, Florence Broadhurst, and Katherine had a problem. She was already stretched to the limit with four other writing projects, she didn’t like wallpaper much and she had absolutely no interest in writing what she called a “promo doos for a wallpaper manufacturer”.

However, when Film Australia gave Gillian and Katherine the green light to make the film of their choice, Katherine began researching Florence’s life in earnest. She was fascinated by how little there was on her. “There was virtually no information,” she tells The Weekly now. “A couple of boxes in the Mitchell Library [in Sydney] … and that was about it.”

She began pursuing leads and leads-within-leads, tracking down former employees, old friends, family members and, in one case, a boutique brothel-keeper on Sydney’s Parramatta Road, whose television writing credits include some of Australia’s most gripping dramas – BlackJack, All Saints, McLeod’s Daughters, Wildside and Halifax F.P. – to name but a few. She knew a good story when she sees one, especially a good detective story.

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(Shortly after Florence’s death in 1977, the brothel-keeper’s mother, Sherdone Rose, a former variety dancer in Alaska, had bought Florence’s Darling Point apartment and, within days of moving in, became convinced – as had the Sydney psychic, Diana Shaw, before her – that Florence was trying to communicate with her.)

Katherine Thompson was intrigued by the ever-changing shape of this woman emerging from the shadows. Florence had been born under a tin roof in 1899 on a cattle station near Mt Perry in Queensland and had fled her origins as quickly – and imaginatively – as possible.

Although barely out of her teens, she’d swept through India, Java, occupied Manchuria, Japan, Siam and Burma during the 1920s with a musical comedy troupe, playing the role of singer and banjolele player. In 1926, she’d become a businesswoman in Shanghai at the height of the city’s flirtation with jazz age decadence. (This is, presumably, when she learned the various arts of pleasure herself.)

She’d ridden camels in Egypt, trekked through Afghanistan, spent a year in India studying Hindu philosophy, visited opium dens in China, and returned to Australia in 1927, where she’d promptly lost her singing voice in a car accident and become engaged to a man she appears to have had no intention of ever marrying.

Immediately after the engagement, she hocked her engagement ring and sailed for London, where she soon married a rich stockbroker, opened a dress salon on New Bond Street, left her husband for a 23-year-old – she was 36 – and then had her only child, Robert. During that time, she went from Florence Broadhurst to Florence Kahn to Mrs Leonard Lewis and back to Florence Broadhurst again.

Her next incarnation was to become a pawnbroker, sell her jewellery to buy a passenger boat, return to Australia to become a painter and then, at the age of 60, take over a wallpaper business in Sydney’s Crown St, behind a trucking yard she and Leonard Lewis had bought.

And having declared Australians to be “afraid of colour”, she set about introducing her countrymen and women to a range of visually sumptuous designs that seemed to cover every colour in the spectrum. On a personal level, she also established herself as one of Sydney society’s most eccentric characters, spinning tall tales about her life and age, and transforming herself with stunning regularity – one day capes and a pixie hat, another day trumpet skirts and pearls, yet another bobby pins and miniskirts – and forever fortified by a new set of false eyelashes or a fresh dusting of her eyelids with wallpaper paint. You name it, Florence flaunted it.

Becoming a wallpaper designer seemed to Katherine Thompson, therefore, an entirely apt vocation for such a woman. “I wasn’t interested in wallpaper … but I was interested in a woman who kept on re-inventing herself … and wallpaper was all about what it covered over, how it spruced things up and changed things. It was a metaphor for her life.”

There are still questions surrounding this life. Among them is whether she actually designed any of the patterns herself – especially given how poor her eyesight was for much of her working life.

Peter Travis, the Speedo swimming costume designer, has called Florence an “opportunite” and “confidence trickster” who was able to capitalise on the brilliance of others to advance her own career. He singles out Phyllis Shillito, the founder of one of Sydney’s early design schools, and John Lang, the young artist who first started the screenprinting business behind Florence’s truck yard in the late 1950s, as authentic designers. By contrast, Florence was mainly the talker, the schemer, the self-promoter. “Florence’s body was displayed in a way grotesquely similar to Glover’s other victims.”
Florence’s only son, Robert Lloyd Lewis, 67, with a portrait of his mother.

Anne-Marie Van de Ven, curator of Decorative Arts and Design at Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum, takes a less harsh view. “I don’t know anyone else who says she never designed anything,” she tells The Weekly. “I’ve interviewed a lot of her [former staff] and I think, as in any design studio, there’s an overriding person … an art director. I don’t think anything would have come out of there without her input.”

**FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS, Robert Lloyd Lewis has been haunted by his mother’s brutal slaying and the possibility that her murderer might still be at large. This has made an already tragedy-filled life sometimes much more difficult to bear.**

In 1964, Robert and his first wife, Marlene, lost their four-and-a-half month-old twin boys to cot death. Two years later, their nine-month-old son, Morgan, died after a car accident in which Marlene was the driver. Marlene then fell into depression and became addicted to over-the-counter drugs before dying from renal failure 13 months after her son’s death.

The police finally had a lead and the killer and thereby explain the reasons that the police might now be able to nail however, has given him cause for hope – that the police might now be able to nail the killer and thereby explain the reasons for her death. He shares writer Katherine Thompson’s conviction that John Oliver, the “Granny Killer”, was not responsible.

“I think Katherine is a lot closer to the mark than a lot of people think,” he says. Recently, Robert was given a new lead, after speaking to a Melbourne psychic who was flown to Sydney to meet him, courtesy of Becker Entertainment, the makers of the Florence Broadhurst documentary.

Sue Clother, the documentary’s co-producer, had met the psychic on another film project and decided to show her a photograph of Florence. The psychic began talking about Florence in a way that left the producer in no doubt that further conversations were warranted. She and her colleague, Charles Hannah, decided to fly her to Sydney to meet Robert, even though work on the documentary had finished. It was a measure of their respect and affection for this 67-year-old man.

“We wanted to help him fulfill his lifelong ambition of solving the murder,” Charles Hannah told The Weekly. "Robert has had a pretty tough old life. He had lost a wife and three children, as well as a mother in brutal circumstances. And this psychic had started talking about Florence in a way that was quite extraordinary. So we flew her up as a favour to Robert.”

On January 12 this year, the psychic and Robert met at a beachside suburb in Sydney’s north. “We met at my sister-in-law’s place,” says Robert, “and we sat in the dining area with two tape recorders running, hers and mine. She said that, in her opinion, two people, a male and a female, had committed the crime and that we were lucky that we had a body to bury, because their idea had been to put it in the boot of their car and take it somewhere. She said the man was now dead, but the woman was still alive and had scrapbooks and everything that had ever been written on my mother … and that she was still fixated with her. She said someone will remember this woman and the scrapbooks, and that this will help solve the murder mystery. And she said, ‘Then, Robert, you’ll be able to die peacefully.’”

Robert Lloyd Lewis aches for nothing more, and his mother – he believes – is fully aware of this. Three weeks before he met the psychic, he spent an entire night awake in bed at home talking to his mother. It was the first time in 15 years they had communed. She told him not to speak publicly about his famous mother, preferring to deal privately with the many challenges her life and death presented to him. (Today, he lives with his third wife, Annie, and son David in north Queensland, and has three other children and seven grandchildren.)

All the renewed interest in Florence, however, has given him cause for hope – that the police might now be able to nail the killer and thereby explain the reasons for her death.