

theatre's GRANDE DAME

Robyn Nevin is a legend of Australian theatre. **David Leser** meets the charismatic – and sometimes controversial – actor-director as she prepares to step back on stage in a one-woman play directed by Cate Blanchett.

LET'S FACE IT, the world of drama can be rather drama-filled – brimful of actors and actresses with precocious talents and vaulting, fragile egos. Through some peculiar alchemy or derring-do of spirit, they live to act and act to live, and hope that, in the process, they don't die (metaphorically) on stage or, as Hollywood legend Spencer Tracy once put it, "bump into the furniture".

It's an exquisite kind of agony this business and for the past nearly half-century, Robyn Nevin has been one of this country's leading self-flagellators – a virtuoso performer who can touch the sides of practically any character she so chooses. Lady Macbeth, Blanche DuBois, Hedda Gabler ... Robyn Nevin has played them all, plus a multitude of others.

You might remember her as the federal court judge in the Australian comedy hit, *The Castle*, or as the world-saving Councillor Dillard in *The Matrix Reloaded*, or as Kate Rogers in *Emerald City*, playwright David Williamson's biting satire about Sydney society. Or on television – in *Halifax f.p.*, *The Dismissal* (she played Lady Kerr, the former governor-general's wife), *The*

Sullivans or *A Toast To Melba*, where she took the role of Nellie herself.

Either way, Robyn Nevin has been captivating audiences for more than 50 years, ever since she appeared as a pale, raven-haired 11-year-old in a school production of *Snow White*. She knew she was good, even then. "I felt I was engaged in something really significant," she says now, her raven hair long since turned to snowy white. "And I clearly had talent."

And not just as a multi-award-winning actress. This Melbourne-born daughter of a businessman father and "housewife" mother was to become an award-winning theatre director as well, assuming the coveted prize of artistic director of the Sydney Theatre Company (STC) in 1999, a job she was to hold until January this year, when she handed over the reins to the new "holy duo" of Australian theatre, Cate Blanchett and husband Andrew Upton.

During her nearly nine years at the helm of the STC, not only did Robyn act in nine plays herself and direct another 12, she was responsible for luring back to the stage Judy Davis, both as director and actor, and Cate Blanchett, both as director

and actor. She was also responsible for creating a new actors' ensemble, the Actors Company, and presiding over completion of the much-heralded Sydney Theatre. Add to that nine seasons' worth of plays to program, commissioning a stable of new writers and directors, wooing sponsors (she gave a speech in Italian for designer Giorgio Armani when he was in Sydney last year) and little wonder that a fellow director once said, "If you were to treat the arts as an eating disorder, Robyn Nevin would be bulimic". In other words, she gorges herself on work.

Never was this more self-evident than in 2006, when she found herself in a semi-deranged state trying to pull off the impossible. By day, she was in rehearsals directing Cate Blanchett and Hugo Weaving in *Hedda Gabler*. By night, she was appearing on stage herself in the Chekov play, *The Cherry Orchard*. And in the witching hours, she was grappling with Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children*, the play that would launch the new Actors Company, for which Robyn had been lobbying for years and for which the NSW government had just invested \$2.5million. >>>

A tour de force in the arts, Robyn Nevin, 65, has played some of the greatest female roles in theatre, and left her indelible mark on the cultural life of the country.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HUGH STEWART.





A woman of many parts (above from left): Robyn playing Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* with Jacki Weaver (right) in 1976; with Kate Fitzpatrick (right) in *Ginger's Last Stand* in 1975; as Kate Rogers in David Williamson's *Emerald City* in 1987.

Oh, and then there was her main job running the biggest theatre company in the land.

Was it any wonder then that she began to unravel. "I had one weekend," she admits now, "when I did the conventional nervous breakdown thing of sitting in my pyjamas for two days. I just stared at the floor. I was numb ... [but] then I bounced back Monday morning."

Ah, yes. No wonder Patrick White called her a survivor. In fact, the great Australian Nobel laureate once wrote a screenplay (*Last Words*) for her, based on that very theme. "I asked him, 'What's the part, Patrick?' And he said, 'A survivor', and I was very disappointed. I didn't want to be the survivor. I wanted to be the princess."

Let it be said here and now that an interview with Robyn Nevin is not one of life's more relaxing experiences. This is partly because, even before you enter the interview room you've been told about the reputation that accompanies the diminutive frame: the ferocious ambition, razor-sharp mind, inexhaustible stamina, withering stare, the long, long memory, the impatience with (perceived or actual) fools, the enormous power wielded within the arts community.

Even the green T-shirt she's wearing on the afternoon of our interview can be construed as a warning. Running top to bottom in bold type are the words: "TURBULENT, MANIPULATIVE, INDULGENT, RIGHTEOUS ..."

"It gets much better as it goes further down," she says smiling ironically, watching

me scanning her front for further danger signs, "REFINED, VIRTUOUS ..."

And that's the point. Robyn Nevin is all these things and more. Mention her name in the industry and many decline to talk or refuse point-blank to be quoted by name.

Others, such as Kate Fitzpatrick, Robyn's former bridesmaid, decide instead to play out their disagreements in public, as was the case four years ago when the two engaged in a bitter, but at times highly comical, war-by-letter to newspapers.

"I'm the best actress in the country," Kate quoted Robyn as having shouted backstage to the late Australian theatre director Rex Cramphorn. "What's she [Kate] doing playing that part?"

To which Robyn replied, "I refute this assertion and counter-claim that Kate Fitzpatrick did not once during her six-month tenancy in my house 25 years ago put out the rubbish bin." Remind her of this now and Robyn replies, drily, "I thought [that was] quite a witty letter."

When I ask Robyn how she reacts to the claim that some people find her intimidating and terrifying, she replies, "It just makes me impatient. What am I supposed to be? It's a bit like Hillary Clinton ... the way she's described as cold and aloof. I'm sure it's connected to gender. I'm sure people find women who are not as they want them to be cold and aloof and, therefore, inadequate and, therefore, a problem and, therefore, intimidating and terrifying. It's exhausting."

As it is reminding her of the falling out she supposedly had with actress Jacki Weaver. Three years ago, Jacki went public with how upset Robyn had become when the former artistic director of the STC,

Richard Wherrett, once chose her over Robyn to play the lead role in Tom Stoppard's play, *The Real Thing*. (Richard Wherrett, formerly Robyn's boss and an outspoken and widely respected theatre director before his death in 2001, claimed later that Robyn, even though she was then associate director of the company, "could not bring herself to see the production", despite his "frequent pleas".)

"Robyn Nevin was ropeable that she wasn't doing *The Real Thing* and stopped speaking to me altogether," Jacki declared. "For the best part of a decade. I was deeply hurt for the first few years and then stopped caring, but not before – in a bout of unworthy ill-temper – I referred to her one day as 'The Grey Nurse'. I'm ashamed to say the nickname caught on. I have since apologised to her. She never apologised to me."

"This is so old," Robyn says now wearily, "and it was a moment, and I got over it, so I don't know the answer to that. And I *did* see her in *The Real Thing*. She didn't know that I had, but I had. And obviously if I'd known that was a problem with her, I would have explained to her that I'd seen it."

"Robyn saw the play on the *last* day," Jacki counters, bemused by Robyn's comments, "and *only* because Richard Wherrett insisted that she go. She snuck in, then snuck out."

Jacki is keen to stress she bears no bitterness towards Robyn. Quite the contrary – she admires her enormously, citing her performance as Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* as one of the best stage performances she's ever witnessed. She does admit, however, to being slightly puzzled at having so >>>



Above: Robyn with her successors as Sydney Theatre Company artistic director, Cate Blanchett and Andrew Upton (right), with STC patron, designer Giorgio Armani, last year. Armani's donation is said to be one of the largest ever to an Australian theatre company.

little work at the STC during Robyn's reign as artistic director.

(This is a common complaint against many artistic directors, but they did come thick and fast during Robyn's tenure: playwrights such as Joanna Murray-Smith who, despite success on Broadway and London's West End, could not get her plays performed at the STC; actresses such as Amanda Muggleton and Sandy Gore, who rarely, if ever, made an appearance; Kate Fitzpatrick, who hasn't appeared at the STC in years; Colin Moody, who stormed out of the Actors Company late last year; directors Gale Edwards and Rodney Fisher, who have faded into the background.)

In the case of Jacki Weaver, however, this struck several people as particularly odd given the rave reviews she received around the country during 2005 for her one-woman play, *The Blonde, the Brunette and the Vengeful Redhead*, by Robert Hewett.

"It was bought by every state theatre company in Australia, except the Sydney Theatre Company," Jacki says now. "They could have made a fortune with it."

"That's a commercial production," Robyn replies, "and we don't take in independent, commercial productions. That's just not what we do." And as for other acting parts, Robyn points out she suggested Jacki for the lead role in Peter Kenna's play *A Hard God* in 2006 and for *Old Masters*, which they did together five years earlier.

The production of *Old Masters* was, in fact, the last play Richard Wherrett saw before he died. He, too, had had a falling

out with Robyn, which he believed had arisen from his memoir, *The Floor of Heaven*, published a year before his death.

"It's not true that we were not speaking," she says now. "We spoke often, [but] he was furious with me because I didn't offer him a job ... And that was very difficult. He wasn't well enough to work, in my view."

Either way, at Jacki Weaver's urging, the two saw each other on the eve of Richard's death, when Robyn came to his bedside. "He'd been unconscious for

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some time," Robyn says now in her impeccable diction, "but I sat with him and held his hand, and talked with him because ... 'Hearing is the last thing to go.'"

If we were to re-write the entire scene above with a different slant, a different cast of characters, without the strains and hurts, the rifts and jealousies so prevalent in the arts, Robyn Nevin would look like a completely different character. Generous, inspiring, brilliant, audacious, funny, fiercely loyal, achingly shy, vulnerable and loveable all at once.

Hugo Weaving was just out of acting school when he joined an actors company and got to see first-hand the way Robyn approached her craft. "She used to come in in a different mood every day," he tells The

Weekly. "But she used those moods to explore different sides of the character ... Robyn is, without doubt, one of the greatest actresses ever to grace the stage in this country."

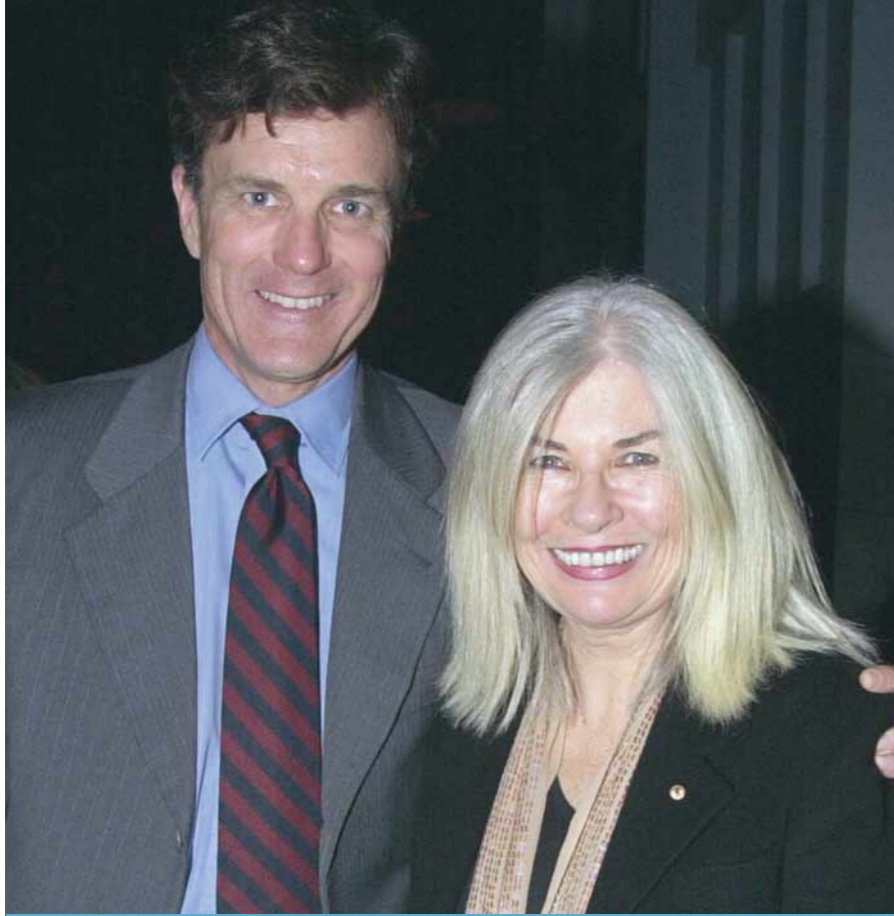
On the night of her farewell last year as artistic director of the STC, 450 people gathered in the new theatre to pay tribute to her many achievements. Sir Tom Stoppard, the English playwright, described what an "international treasure" she was. Miranda Otto gushed about how much she loved working with her. Barry Kosky, the

Australian director, thanked her for her passion and obsession.

Then Noni Hazlehurst stole the show with an uproarious version of Puccini's aria *Nessun Dorma*: "Your energy is all too rare," she sang. "Your talent, intellect and ability to silence people with a single icy stare beyond compare ..."

And let's not forget the charm, as STC general manager Rob Brookman pointed out on the night: "When Robyn turns up the charm, it's best to be blindfolded and tied to the ship on which you are sailing".

So, as you can see, there are any number of Robyn Nevin open to interpretation and any number of people who will rush the ramparts to defend her. Trouble is Robyn herself doesn't make it easy helping you try to crack the code. "I'm not here to >>>



Robyn with her partner, actor and screenwriter Nicholas Hammond. The actress says she enjoys being at home or socialising away from the pressures of performance.

tell you my entire life story," she says rather frostily when I inquire about her marriage in the early 1970s to the violent prisoner-turned-playwright, Jim McNeil.

Robyn had met Jim shortly after his release from prison for shooting a police officer and, six weeks after she'd appeared in his play *How Does Your Garden Grow?*, the two were married in a Sydney, garden. "It was a pretty bloody extraordinary event," says author and journalist David Marr of the day he witnessed more than 30 years ago.

"It was all so charged with adventure, danger and possibility. A lot of women fell for Jim McNeil, but Robyn was the only one who married him. It was a physically brave thing to do because he was an erratic and, at times, violent drunk."

"All I will say about that," replies Robyn now, "is that I knew the poet Jim McNeil and that's enough."

Earlier, I had asked the 65-year-old actress whether her childhood had been a happy one. "Not particularly, no," she replied, "and I think I sought refuge in literature. It was a very comforting and rich place to go."

Can you say why it wasn't happy? "Well, I had quite a troubled family, so that's as much I'd like to say, really."

What about being a young actress and single mother (her daughter, Emily Russell, is a member of the Actors Company)? "It was hard," she replies more willingly. "I don't think I knew another single parent at that time. It was enormously difficult to support my child and I was always the first one out of the dressing room to go home to relieve the babysitter."

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As the helicopters fly above and the sun dances on the water in Walsh Bay, I wonder aloud whether it's easier playing a character than playing oneself? "What an extraordinary question," she replies, staring at me as if I've just had a lobotomy.

Then, she offers this jewel of an insight: "I don't enjoy living my life in front of 500 people a night ... or 1200 people a night, or whatever it is. That's not a very relaxed way to be. It's a job. It's a profession. You need skills and technique for that, [but] it's no way to live your life."

"I enjoy being at home on my own [she lives in Sydney with her American-born partner, actor and screenwriter Nicholas Hammond, famous for his yodelling role in *The Sound of Music*] or interacting socially with people where I don't have the pressures that you have when you're performing in front of an audience. I can't imagine anyone preferring to live in front of an audience than to live privately."

Yet you've been doing it for so long, I suggest. "It's not comfortable. It doesn't get any better. The [terror] doesn't lessen."

Does it keep you awake at night? "Yes,

I have anxiety ... Anxiety becomes familiar. It grows and grows and grows."

And yet you keep doing the very thing that robs you of your peace of mind? "Well, I'm an artist ... and that's the curse of the artist. You don't have a choice."

On her way back to Sydney from New York in March 2006, Robyn Nevin bought a copy of the memoir by American writer Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a beautiful but devastating account of how Joan found herself dealing with the sudden death of her husband and the crippling illness of her daughter.

Robyn couldn't put the book down. And she decided she wanted to appear as Joan Didion in the one-woman play based on this book. Furthermore, she wanted Cate Blanchett to direct her, something the Academy Award-winning actress was only too willing to see happen.

"It is exhilarating," Cate tells *The Weekly* now, "to be in the rehearsal room collaborating with an actor such as Robyn, who is able to leap seemingly insurmountable acting hurdles in a single bound."

What's more, as Cate observes, Robyn no longer has to juggle the duties of being company manager and actor-director. "I imagine she's welcoming the simple purity of focus that is now afforded her, particularly given the demanding nature of the role."

Robyn couldn't agree more. "It was as difficult as it could have possibly been," she says of her time as artistic director, "[and] it was compounded by the fact that people said, 'She'll take all the best roles for herself and she'll create all these wonderful productions for herself', which I absolutely didn't do."

"It was very unpleasant to hear that back ... and I found it very, very difficult because I was concentrating on so many other matters outside of the rehearsal room. And I was always tired and always stretched. And I didn't have thinking time or absorption time. So they were less than ideal circumstances in which to work and I don't think I worked at my best once, as an actress or a director."

Now, however, the planets seem to have aligned. Robyn Nevin is to play one of America's most respected journalist-essayists, under the guidance of Cate Blanchett, in a role that only British legend Vanessa Redgrave has performed.

Almost food for happiness? "Yes, I'm happy," the actress says, finally. "I'm very, very happy. It's extraordinary. I haven't done this for 15 years [focus just on acting]. I feel like a purring cat." ■

Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, starring Robyn Nevin, opens on March 25.