



Dame Edna wins over the Yanks

&

By David Leser

An Australian institution, Dame Edna Everage, is the toast of the US, with her sell-out runs on Broadway and critics' bouquets.



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



Left: Dame Edna gets the star treatment in Denver. Above: Edna with two of the Ednaettes, her US tour dance troupe.

Denver, Colorado, is the "Queen of the Plains", the largest city in a 1000 square kilometre area. For more than 125 years, it has been the cultural and entertainment capital of a vast region once known as the Wild West. It prides itself on its contradictions: part sleepy cow-town, part chic urban enclave.

Never before, though, has it witnessed anything quite like Dame Edna Everage. On a northern summer's night recently, Australia's most celebrated woman, the megastar from Moonee Ponds, the woman who once said that her interior decorator and gynaecologist were one and the same person, flounced on to the stage of the Denver Auditorium Theatre and slayed them in the aisles.

"It really is me tonight," she declared in her trademark piercing falsetto. "In person. In the flesh ... I'm not a clone. I'm not a look-alike. I'm not genetically modified. I'm real ... and in your face!"

And so she was – in a shocking pink and black sequined dress, behind enormous harlequin glasses, under a bluff of wisteria hair – for the next two-and-a-half irreverent, malicious, uproarious hours.

"I'm a little bit nervous tonight," she confided. "Isn't it silly? Edna nervous ... I'm more nervous tonight in this little tucked-away auditorium than I would be on the stage of a Broadway theatre ... (pause) ... in front of nicely dressed people!" (Bang. First blow.)

And then looking up towards the mezzanine level: "Goodness knows what the paupers are wearing up there. Probably trash bags with holes in them ... Hello paupies, hello ... 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 complement of getting a baby sitter 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!"

"Pardon?"

"Rick and Rachel!"

"Don't snap at me Anne! Who's looking after them tonight, Anne?"

"A nanny."

"A nanny? Does she live in with you, does she Anne?"

"It's a he."

"A he! What a modern little possum you are! (Gales of laughter.) A he with nurturing skills."

"Is your husband there with you, Anne?"

"Um ... ah ... no."

"Where is he?"

"At the other house."

"At the other house? Oh dear. We've stumbled upon a dysfunctional family (more laughter) ... Two houses are there? I bet you got the bigger one, did you ... ?" (Uproar.)

Nearly a quarter of a century after conspicuously failing to crack the US scene, Dame Edna Everage, the self-styled "(prob-

ably Jewish) housewife, talk-show host, social anthropologist, humanitarian, investigative journalist, swami, children's book illustrator, spin doctor and icon", has finally made it with her "royal tour" of the US.

Beginning in San Francisco three years ago, she then moved onto Broadway a year later. There, she played for nine sell-out months and won every major critics' award in the city, including the prestigious Tony (never mind that they couldn't decide which category to put her in. Musical or play? Best actor or best actress?) Edna has since been crisscrossing the country, playing eight shows a week to packed houses in 15 major cities. She has been lionised in the New Yorker magazine as a "sublime comic creation", embraced as an agony aunt by the equally prestigious Vanity Fair magazine, and even been suggested for the presidency of Harvard by the Boston Globe.

"People have been just clawing 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.

The notoriously sensitive Barry left New York with his confidence bruised, but vowing to return. He also fired his own ► poisoned arrow at Eder, describing

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDDIE SANDERSON.



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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.

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

In the late ‘80s, Barry – or at least Edna – returned with her own celebrity chat show: she sat in a sauna with Mel Gibson; she flirted with Richard Gere; she argued with Chevy Chase; she parried 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 Adventures 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

What he is doing is performing a lifelong act of revenge which ... is the essence of good comedy.

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 compliance 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 who built mock Elizabethan, neo-Georgian and Spanish-mission homes for a living. His mother, Louisa, was, by Barry’s own account, a reproachful and socially ambitious woman who “never spoke to foreigners” and who carried within her a life seemingly cordoned off to her son.

In his 1993 autobiography, *More Please*, Barry describes the first ancient wound of his childhood when he asked his mother if she loved him. “Well,” she replied evasively, “naturally I love your father most of all, and then my mother and father, and after

that, you and your sister, just the same.” Barry still seems scarred by the inference. “Not to get a clear picture from one’s parents as to where one stood in their affections, that was a troubling thing,” he says softly.

This was the deficient seed from which the “queen of control”, Edna Everage, would eventually spring. Edna was the name of Barry’s favourite nanny, but what Edna reflected were the preoccupations of her time. “Cleanliness, cooking, interior decorations ... the things that *The Women’s Weekly* stood for,” Barry says. “*The Weekly* was the Gideon’s Bible of the period. It was chubby. It took a week to read. It was all you needed.

“So a lot of the kitschy mythology of my youth came from commercial radio, and periodicals like *The Weekly* all fed into this family life and how things should be ... Authors hadn’t really looked to that little corner of Australian life, what I feel is not just a corner but a cornerstone of Australian life – suburban life and its oppressive nature, its bigotries, its cosy self-confidence.

“I railed against [that] in this comic-strip invention of the 1950s and I was genuinely astonished when journalists said, ‘Well, is this someone in your family?’ And I thought to myself, ‘Well, it’s several people and certainly it’s something in which my mother’s influence participated. It was something to do with aunts. I think I once said that if England is the motherland and Germany the fatherland, then Australia is the auntyland.”

Edna’s last name was Everage, because she was average. She was married to Norm, because he 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 of the standards of the little people of their generation.” ►



Above left: Barry and third wife Diane Milstead marry in 1979 and (right) with current wife, Lizzie Spender, last year.



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 anxieties [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 football matches, he could often be found sitting with his back to the playing field – knitting. "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 Dali 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 be treated seriously.

Later, at Melbourne University, where he completed no courses and passed no exams, Barry became a legendary figure for his maniacal revues and exhibitions. They included displaying works such as Pus in Boots – a Wellington boot full of custard – and Cakescape – cake pressed between glass which, upon

One grows up with a desire to murder one's parents, but you can't ... do that. So I murder them ... on stage.

turning mouldy, created a Jackson Pollock-like abstraction.

In live performance he was equally unorthodox. On one occasion, an audience of students stormed the stage of the Union Theatre after being driven into a frenzy by his madcap role-playing of a missionary's wife. Barry only managed to avoid being throttled by hiding in the broom cupboard. His exploits made the front page of the Melbourne Sun and his group was banned from ever performing there again – until he re-entered the campus triumphantly nearly two decades later riding a camel.

A dazzling aura surrounded Barry. "Rumours began to circulate," said one contemporary. "He was reputed to live in a darkened, incense-filled room and to drink crème de menthe out of his shoe. He had been seen wearing six-toed gloves on his feet in public transport. It was even said he had purchased, at great expense, the complete works of the Marquis de Sade, bound in human skin."

Barry stoked the rumours with relish. Outside university, he became known for elaborate stunts, which had no other purpose than to outrage and provoke. In one infamous caper, he had an accom-

plise dress as a blind man and enter a non-smoking compartment of a Melbourne train with his leg in a cast. Barry then walked into the compartment and began swearing at the man in a foreign language and kicking his leg. He then stormed out as the blind man began to beg the startled commuters to "forgive him".

In another act of mad farce – one which he would later repeat on the streets of London – Barry buried a roast chicken and a bottle of champagne in a rubbish bin beside a bus stop. Dressed as a tramp, he then came along and started rummaging, in front of an embarrassed queue of people, through the refuse, before suddenly coming up with his prize.

"This was before television and Candid Camera," Barry has said. "The fact is, this was not addressed to an audience. The audience was me. It was really to astonish people with an inexplicable happening."

Barry was also attempting to elicit a "chain reaction of irrational behaviour" by getting onlookers to also rifle through the garbage. That's how he got himself temporarily banned from Qantas flights – by tipping salad into an airline sick-bag, simulating wild vomiting and then eating the contents of the bag.

"If an air hostess sees you," Barry said, "it [could] produce what I call the Chain Chunder. Five minutes later the pilot is throwing up."

The natural heir – or heiress – to this absurd and subversive behaviour was, of course, the character of Edna Everage. She first made her appearance on the back of a bus in rural Victoria in 1955, when Barry was taking Twelfth Night on tour. He was 21 and it was his first professional year as an actor.

As Barry explained to his biographer John Lahr: "I found that I had a good falsetto voice, and I invented a character to go with it – a female character."

"You see, every night when the curtain fell on Twelfth Night, the local lady mayoress or the ladies' committee would invite this distinguished cast from the city of Melbourne to what was called a 'bun fight': cups of tea and wonderful cakes only Australians seem to make ..."

"They used to give little speeches about how wonderful Twelfth Night was. I had a knack of anticipating some of the ladies' speeches very, very well, as my funny little character in the back of the bus."

On December 19 that year, Edna Everage made her stage debut in a sketch called The Olympic Hostess. Melbourne was about to host the Olympic Games and Edna was offering her Moonee Ponds home to an athlete. With her digs at various nationalities and her descriptions of her "lovely home", the audience was given ►

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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 1958, Barry Humphries released a record, *Wildlife in Suburbia*, which had monologues from Sandy Stone – his sad, loveless 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 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 is 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 Madame Tussauds, met the royal family, had badges, mugs and spectacles made in her honour and seen her 1989 autobiography, *My Gorgeous Life*, climb onto the best-seller list – in the non-fiction category! She's also played to packed houses in Ireland, Scandinavia, Germany, Hungary, Belgium and the Netherlands. Cementing her place as a pop culture icon was Edna's guest appearance on Ally McBeal in the US this year.

Of course, Edna was never Barry Humphrey's only comic-grotesque character. Bazza McKenzie and later the even more vulgar Sir Les Patterson, were responsible for embarrassing an entire nation for many years, but also for reviving a language thought moribund. From their foul mouths, urinating became "pointing the Percy to the porcelain", thirst turned into "dry as a dead dingo's donger". Vomiting became "chundering" or "yodelling on the lawn". Bazza McKenzie was the appalling ingenue abroad; Les, the yobbo spiv with the taipan in his trousers.

And then, of course, there was Sandy Stone, the Australian Charlie Chaplin figure who died and came back as the ghost of the suburbs. He talked endlessly to no one from his rocking chair, a plaintive, dried-up voice from an unexamined life. Sandy Stone was the part of Barry that never left home.

"I still enjoy him very much," he says now, unaware that his friend, antiquarian bookseller Nicholas Pounder, has already regaled me with an hilarious account of a trip to Bronte Beach in Sydney last year, where Barry turned himself into Sandy Stone and walked through the local cemetery in his slippers and dressing gown, muttering to himself. "Jesus, Mr Humphries," said a wild-eyed drunk from underneath his cardboard hut when he saw the ghost himself. "Welcome back to Australia."

In other words, Edna Everage was far from Barry's only alter-ego. She just happened to be his most popular and powerful one. In her 46 years, she'd grown from a stick-like figure into a colossus bestriding the globe. She'd been cross-fertilised with the Queen, with Streisand, with Madonna. She'd become a dame (courtesy of Gough Whitlam). A superstar housewife. A megastar. She'd taken on a life of her own – her own blood stream, her own metabolism – so much so that to address Edna as Barry invariably invited a polite rebuke, along the lines of "Barry is not here".

So, naturally, this was the challenge facing the profile writer. To try and find, amidst all the disguises, the real Barry Humphries; to go beyond what we thought we already knew. We knew, for example, that Barry had been married four times and that his current wife, Lizzie Spender, was the daughter of the late,

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 booze.

Beyond 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 knee? 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 in order 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 stage ... I really find the stage the most comfortable refuge there is ... I find refuge from – dare 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 complement 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 want 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 need in people ..."

"And to see them examine their lives suddenly. They look very shocked when you speak to them because they're used to being passive witnesses of an 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



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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 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 water, 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."

"If I was in a debate with Edna, I would disagree with Edna Everage on almost every point – moral or ethical or metaphysical." Barry takes another swig from his bottle and re-adjusts his dress.

Earlier in our discussions, when Barry was dressed – much to my relief I realise now – as Barry Humphries, he told me that only in interviews such as this, did he give his character a thought.

"She [Edna] springs to life when the spotlight hits her," he said. "The spotlight strikes this invention on the stage who becomes infused with life, just as the creature of Dr Frankenstein suddenly comes alive. And it is a kind of Frankenstein monster of which I'm not faintly terrified."

For four nights in a row, I have seen Barry Humphries' Frankenstein monster turn the Denver Auditorium Theatre on its head. I have seen a master of pun-making, irony and innuendo take liberties with the old, the poor, the infirm, the coloured, the disabled, the badly dressed, and anyone else who happened to come within his twisted range of vision.

I have seen a game of collusion, at once both wicked and hysterical, where the heavy veil of American political correctness has been lifted and people have entered a state of near madness, purely through the power of a man's wit. I have seen people almost collapse from laughing or, in the case of the man opposite me with the breathing apparatus, almost stop breathing.

Whether Americans have, through television, become more receptive to other kinds of humour; or whether they have found, as some might suggest, a sense of irony at last, who knows? But to have witnessed nearly 8000 people, over four nights, standing, stomping, whooping, yelling and singing at the end of the show, as well as waving and thrusting their gladioli into the air, was to have witnessed something truly mysterious and unique at work.

Edna is now planning her next tour of Australia and is already thinking up new themes. She is considering joining a book-reading group, running a new political party, or merely trying to re-discover her roots. "I think when Edna comes back to Australia next year," Barry says pensively, "she is really more and more striving to go back to where she belongs, to her own people."

Funnily enough, Barry's mission sounds not too dissimilar. "It's a very itinerant life I'm leading," he says, "and sometimes rather emotionally disturbing. I felt it very acutely this morning. I went for a walk and saw a nice

outdoors coffee place, and stopped there to have a cappuccino for no better reason than there was an extremely pretty girl sitting there.

"So I had my coffee and I thought, 'I'm sick of touring. Here I am in Denver – interesting though it is – wandering around at my great age, sipping coffee amid a kind of harmless, geriatric voyeurism, and not such a good cup of coffee at that.'

"And so I think of Australia. I used not to because all my sort of artistic interests are European. [But] I imagine myself in a house on a cliff, looking out over Port Phillip Bay on a stormy afternoon. And when I do project myself into an Australian coastal landscape – as long as I'm in a reasonably nice house with some of my things, preferably with [my] 20,000 books – I do feel comfortable and agreeable. I'm slowly moving towards that."

Does this mean you've finally softened towards Australia? "I've never felt hostile towards Australia – as long as I don't have to think about Australian politics or the horrible, vulgar triumphalism of sport ... or the terrible self-congratulatory atmosphere of Australia."

"I once said, 'As you fly towards Australia you hear a strange kind of thumping noise. It gets louder and louder as you approach. It's the sound of 18 million people patting themselves on the back.'

"But Australia isn't that, is it? It's the lovely things we can do and places we can go. You know, this is really where I belong. For a long time I looked at gum trees with a certain disdain. Not now. I actually bought some oil of eucalyptus to put in my bath. Perhaps that's a turning point. It was in Houston, Texas – at the absolute nadir [of my tour]. I reached towards those old gum leaves, sap that I am. Like a koala."

"So I think the last part of one's life is a journey back. It has a sort of symmetry. I still sort of hope that death is an option for me ... but should my expectations of immortality be disappointed, then I think Australia would be quite a place really [to die]."

Barry pauses for effect. "I will be a ghost," he says finally, with a gleam in his eyes, "because I have a very strong ... kind of psychic doppelgänger which will survive. And it will haunt probably the house my father built in Camberwell ... I feel sorry for the very nice Ukrainians who live there. They should enjoy it while they can."

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