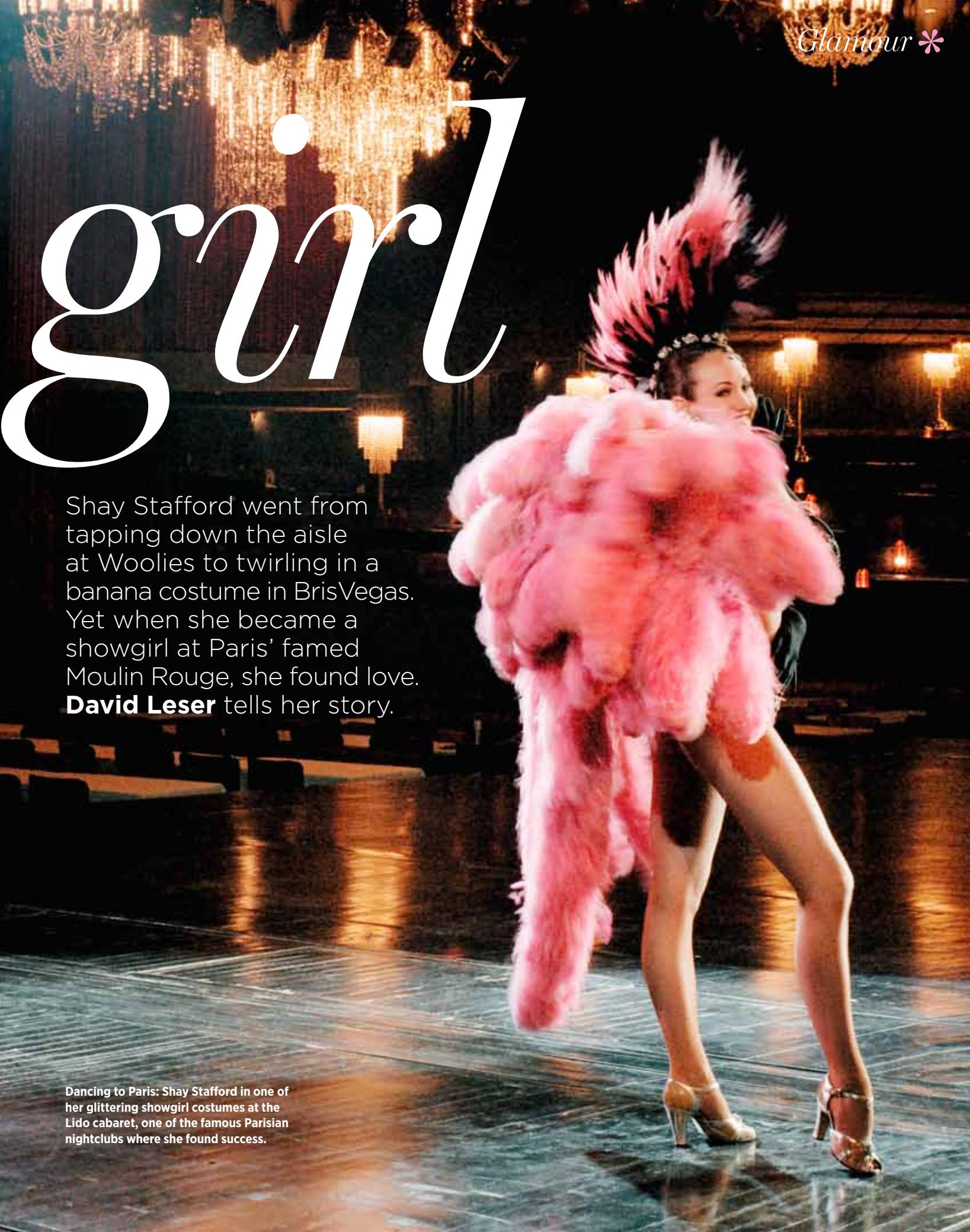


Memoirs of an Aussie showgirl



PHOTOGRAPH BY CARLA COULSON



Shay Stafford went from tapping down the aisle at Woolies to twirling in a banana costume in BrisVegas. Yet when she became a showgirl at Paris' famed Moulin Rouge, she found love. **David Leser** tells her story.

Dancing to Paris: Shay Stafford in one of her glittering showgirl costumes at the Lido cabaret, one of the famous Parisian nightclubs where she found success.



“Even when sitting in the pew at church during Sunday morning Mass, my feet would silently tap out a combination on the stone floor.”



Left: Shay in November last year, at the end of her 12-year showgirl career. Clockwise from above: Shay in her glamorous work clothes at the Lido cabaret.

I WILL NEED TO see your breasts,” the ballet mistress declared matter-of-factly.

“Now?” the young woman replied. “Here?”

“Yes,” the mistress said, nodding to the lithesome shape and lighting a Marlboro Red.

The young woman turned her back and, in slow motion, began to slide out of the straps of her leotard. With a deep breath, she turned around, hands on hips, and offered her inquisitor a radiant showgirl smile.

The older woman took a long drag on her cigarette, sized up the young woman’s attributes for what seemed an eternity, then declared in her thick Yorkshire accent, “Smashing”.

Not your run-of-the-mill interview, true, but then the Moulin Rouge, the famed Parisian cabaret, is not your run-of-the-mill employer.

Just ask Shay Stafford, the young woman from the Brisbane suburb of Tarragindi, who was the one unveiling herself that day, 13 years ago, for the cabaret’s *maitresse de ballet*, Janet Pharaoh.

Within 48 hours of arriving in the City of Light, Shay had cartwheeled across the rehearsal room floor to land a job as one of the cabaret’s Doriss Girl dancers, named after Moulin Rouge’s founding ballet mistress, Doris Haug. Now the only question was: did she have the goods to be one of the “nudes”?

Janet Pharaoh still remembers the moment vividly. “I asked to see Shay’s boobies,” she told *The Weekly* in Sydney recently, while holding auditions for new prospective dancers for the Paris cabaret, “and Shay definitely had nice boobies.”

Were they smashing? “Yes, they were smashing. And they still are smashing.”

Shay Stafford is now sitting in front of me in a cafe in Sydney’s Rose Bay, nursing

her 10-month-old daughter, Rose. Her 12 years as a Paris showgirl are still fresh in the mind – and well sculpted into the body – but it seems indequate to try and verify her ballet mistress’ glowing assessment. I take her word for it, especially given that Shay describes Janet Pharaoh as the ultimate “connoisseur of breasts”.

This might all seem rather academic, prurient even, except for the fact that a cabaret dancer needs to be not just exceptional at dancing and to have extraordinary powers of endurance and resilience, she also needs to possess glorious form and shape. And Shay Stafford, at 175cm tall, with a waist measuring 64cm and perfect 90cm hips, has glorious form and shape.

She was born to dance, although never in her wildest dreams did she think it would be as a showgirl for the two most famous cabarets in the world, Moulin Rouge and Le Lido. Then again, as many as 60 per cent of the Paris showgirls turn out to be Australian, owing to our huge concentration of dance schools and the fact that, in Janet Pharaoh’s words, there is “something in our breeding that produces lots of gorgeous, tall girls”.

Shay Stafford entered the world, stage right, on August 21, 1974, daughter of a rugby league-playing, welder father and nurse mother. At the age of six, she attended her first ballet class in a suburban church hall in Brisbane. She was wearing mint green terry towelling shorts, a pink T-shirt and honey-blonde pigtails. She had no idea what she was doing, except that something in her ancestral line seemed to be stirring. (Her maternal grandparents had loved dancing so much they’d been dubbed the “Fred and Ginger” of Brisbane during the 1940s.)

At the age of 10, she took up jazz dance classes, then graduated to tap dancing. After that, she couldn’t keep her feet still. “Shay Stafford – stop dancing for the love of God and watch the ball,” her netball coach would scream, as she practised her dance steps inside the goal mouth. ➤

"I would tap up the concrete stairs from the backyard to the dining room table," Shay writes in her forthcoming book, *Memoirs Of A Showgirl*. "I would forward slap down the cereal aisle at Woolworths. Even when sitting in the pew at church during Sunday morning Mass, my feet would silently tap out a combination on the stone floor.

"For a period of almost two years, there was hardly a smooth, hard surface in the whole of Brisbane that was spared the frantic, compulsive tapping of my perpetually moving feet."

At the age of 17, fresh out of high school, she began performing at the Tivoli Theatre in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley. The only decorations on the walls were posters advertising old shows at the Lido in Paris. Were they trying to tell her something?

Two years later, she was offered a job at a seaside resort in Japan. This eventually led back to Australia, to a stint at Jupiters Casino on the Gold Coast, where she appeared in a show called Tropical Nights dressed as – wait for it – a bunch of bananas!

“‘Don’t get fat, don’t get skinny,’ the tape-measuring, breast-scrutinising ballet mistress would warn her Doriss Girls.”

She then went to the Cameron Highlands in Malaysia to be cast as a highlander, performing in a room doubling as a Chinese restaurant, before returning to Japan to appear in an Elvis Presley revival show.

Then, at the age of 23, she was catapulted into a glittering new world.

Moulin Rouge had started as a high-class bordello in 1889, a place where courtesans could entertain the gabardine-suited gentlemen of the city with all the titillating pleasures at their disposal. Opened by a former butcher in the spring of 1889 as a way of taking full advantage of the crowds arriving for the World Fair (and the unveiling

Shay applying the finishing touches to her ornate make-up for the show *Bonheur*.



of the Eiffel Tower that year), it was an instant sensation.

The location was perfect – right at the base of La Butte de Montmartre (the hill of Montmartre) in the red light district of Pigalle – and its saucy, flagrant displays of dancing would soon become immortalised through the paintings of Toulouse-Lautrec.

Over the years, it would play host to some of the world's leading French and international stars – Edith Piaf, Maurice Chevalier, Yves Montand, Ella Fitzgerald, Liza Minnelli, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Elton John – but it was always for its high-kicking French cancan and outlandish, kitsch showgirl routines, replete with topless dancing, that it would become best known.

Shay was modest, but not too modest to pass up the chance of a lifetime. Within a few weeks of her arrival, she was dancing two shows a night, six

nights a week, and in case you haven't seen a Moulin Rouge cabaret, this meant performing cartwheels, high kicks and various other physical pyrotechnics in sequined G-strings, backless and frontless bejewelled leotards, shoes with six-centimetre heels and, sometimes, a one-metre high feathered head-dress balanced on the crown – all of it in front of 800 well-paying, delirious patrons.

The body became everything. "Don't get fat, don't get skinny," the tape-measuring, breast-scrutinising ballet mistress would warn her Doriss Girls, just in case they were tempted to breach their contracts by eating too much or too little.

Luckily, Shay had a fast metabolism and so all the after-work crêpe suzettes, croque monsieurs and mixed cocktails were never going to hamper her career.

Quite the contrary. Within three months of donning her first feathers ➤



Shay with husband Bryce Corbett, who devotedly turned up night after night to watch her, and their son, Flynn, in Paris.

and sequined G-string, she'd found herself appointed "captain" of the dancers, charged with issuing corrections to all the other dancers, some of whom were 10 to 15 years her senior.

Within short succession, she was asked to become a permanent soloist, then a replacement principal dancer, a role for which she was required to not only dance, but mime a medley of classic French ballads.

most prestigious jewellery houses. She ended up lying in Karl Lagerfeld's bath.

On another occasion, she walked into a Paris nightclub with a clutch of showgirl friends in tow and ended up colliding with Hollywood royalty itself. "Oh my God, oh my God," her friend, Lisa, exclaimed when they sat down. "It's Leonardo DiCaprio. He's sitting at the table next to us." Yes, he was – and very soon he was buying them drinks.

“He came to the show 75 times. I think it was adoration in the beginning and then he just wanted to show me off to all his friends.”

Paris had become her home. She had a French boyfriend, a studio apartment and a showgirl's calling card, giving her access to the city's best bars, hotels and nightclubs.

Yes, there was the backstage politics. There was intrigue and jealousy, and problems for certain dancers with drugs and body image. There was also the sheer physicality of the work, injury and exhaustion a constant companion.

Yet for this Brisbane girl with stars in her eyes, living in Paris was like walking on air. On one occasion, she was actually flown to Monaco and Cannes in a private helicopter, to model jewellery for Cartier, one of the world's

After nearly three years with the Moulin Rouge, Shay joined the ranks of the Lido, the premier cabaret on the most famous boulevard in the world, the Champs-Élysées. She wanted a change and the Lido offered exactly that – bigger stages, bigger audiences and more outrageous sets. (The costumes alone for the latest show, *Bonheur*, would cost the company nearly \$4.5 million.)

When dancing the principal role – and, yes, she became the replacement principal dancer at the Lido as well – Shay actually arrived on a cloud dressed as an angel, then in another scene, stepped out of a Learjet, which had somehow

manifested through the stage roof, ready to go shopping.

"Moments like that are so precious," she says now. "One thousand people looking up at you, beaming and laughing. It was so cheesy, but so much fun."

Yet the show had to stop at some point and the last thing Shay wanted was to end up like some of the other girls, jaded and spent, simply going through the motions until the next pay check.

Besides which, she'd fulfilled a second dream while becoming a Paris habitué. After several French boyfriends, including a film actor friend of Leonardo DiCaprio's, Shay had found her life partner in the form of Australian journalist, Bryce Corbett, himself a hopeless romantic and Francophile.

In 2007, the couple married and, very soon, had two children under the age of two (including Rose's older brother, Flynn). They decided, despite the regret of leaving a city they adored, to return home. Shay needed "baby time" in the wide open spaces of Australia and a break from 12 years of dancing, and Bryce needed ... ahem ... to find something else to do besides turning up at the Lido each night to watch his partner dance!

"He came to the show 75 times," Shay says now, bemused. "I think it was adoration in the beginning and then he just wanted to show me off to all his friends. It started getting silly in the end. People would be rolling their eyes ... 'Here he is again'."

Who could blame him? Ewan McGregor's Christian lost his heart completely for Nicole Kidman's Satine in Baz Luhrmann 2001 Oscar-winning film, *Moulin Rouge!*, and ever since we've been falling in love all over again for turn-of-the-century French cabaret.

Shay Stafford, the Brisbane girl who couldn't stop tapping her feet all those years ago, is living, breathing proof of it.

Memoirs Of A Showgirl, published by Hachette Australia, \$35, will be released on November 1.

Postscript: Bryce Corbett and Shay Stafford are friends of this writer, and Bryce is Associate Editor of *The Weekly* and the author of the best-selling memoir *A Town Like Paris*.