

GERALDINE TURNER

TURNER'S
TURN

A disarmingly honest memoir



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First published in 2022 by New Holland Publishers
Sydney • Auckland

Level 1, 178 Fox Valley Road, Wahroonga, NSW 2076, Australia
5/39 Woodside Ave, Northcote, Auckland 0627, New Zealand

newhollandpublishers.com

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A record of this book is held at the National Library of Australia.

ISBN 9781760794439

Group Managing Director: Fiona Schultz
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Printed in China

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*For Brian
And the babies*

Thank you to James Laurie
for encouraging me to write this book.

Foreword

When Geraldine was a teenager and already an accomplished performer, a journalist asked her what her future ambitions were. She said her ambition was for Australians to think of her as 'Our Geraldine' in the same way that people spoke of the great Gladys Moncrieff as 'Our Glad'. Looking back, she's now embarrassed at how brash that ambition seemed, and she believes that by no stretch of the imagination has she achieved that status. Well, maybe not, but if she has fallen short it's not by all that much.

Often we hear some performer's career described as stellar and wince because we know it's been something less than that, but in Geraldine's case that adjective has been more than earned. She has played with verve and panache just about all the great female roles in musical theatre and many memorable roles in straight theatre, captivating audiences since the seventies. We go to the theatre so we can be up close and personal to great stories being brought to life by great performances and when Geraldine was in a cast you knew you were going to get everything she could give. There was electricity in the theatre every time she entered stage left or stage right. Something special was about to happen. And it always did. I still remember her memorable performance as the witheringly honest Jenny in a wonderful revival of my own play *Don's Party*.

It's very hard to define what makes great actors so riveting. It's something to do with energy, presence, charisma and timing but finally for me it comes down to watchability. You simply can't take your eyes off them. There's a magic you can't understand but you love it. Geraldine has that in spades. She's delighted countless audiences with that magic for so long now that you assume that the confidence and panache you see on stage is what she is offstage. Not so, which is why her memoir is so surprising, touching and revealing. You might assume it's going to be simply a recollection of her many stage triumphs, which of course are there, but what's also there are the anxieties and insecurities and regrets that lie just under her confident surface.

Geraldine is still haunted by her past. An erratic, unpredictable and at times unbalanced mother whose love and approval she desperately sought but so seldom got. A father who was caring and loving when sober but violent and menacing when he was drunk. Brothers who never stopped fighting viciously and who at one Christmas gathering became so enraged that one threatened the others with a shotgun. One brother spent years in prison for manslaughter and Geraldine was the only family member compassionate enough to regularly visit him in prison. She still feels guilt and distress that she couldn't love her family more, but their behaviour makes the reasons more than understandable.

Geraldine is honest enough to admit that at times her own temper got the better of her and caused irreparable damage to some of her theatrical relationships, and how her hunger for the love and acceptance that never came from her mother caused her to tolerate far too much from male partners, but what emerges overall from this candid and very readable memoir is her warm heart, her anger at injustice, and her fragility. A casual insensitive remark from a random member of the public endured stoically in public can still cause her to weep buckets in private. It's still hard for her to understand the human cruelty she was exposed to in her family and still sees around her, because it's the very antithesis of her own forgiving nature. It's a great relief to finally read that this special person has at last found the partner she deserves and a life with him of relative contentment and peace.

This is the story of one of our all-time greatest stage performers and also the story of an admirable human being who overcame a nightmare upbringing to become very close to 'Our Geraldine'.

David Williamson

March, 2022

Time and Time Again

*W*e're on the bus. I'm little. Perhaps it's my earliest memory. I'm not sure of anything, as this happens many times over my childhood years, not only on the bus, sometimes in department stores. She does it once at ballet. I scream and run down Charlotte Street in Brisbane, closely followed by my teacher. Some things blur over time. You learn to block things out. You want to. You need to. You learn to have a poker face to hide the hurt. A lot of it I don't remember. I have a good poker face my whole life. I can hide a lot of things.

My mother and I are on the bus.

Suddenly, Mum starts shouting, talking to someone who isn't there. She's swearing. She doesn't usually swear, unless she is having one of her 'fits' or is really cranky.

She rants. Then lies down in the aisle of the bus, starts pulling at her clothes and accusing the bus driver at the top of her voice.

'He wants to fuck me! Stop him! You want to fuck me, you friggin' bastard! Somebody do something!'

No-one on the bus does anything. They stare out the windows as if nothing is happening. I do too.

'She's not with me.'

I don't know the word 'embarrassed', but I feel it keenly. I want to disappear.

There is buzzing in my head.

Suddenly, she's sitting beside me again.

'What's up with you?' she says.

'Nothing.'

She slaps me. It hurts.

'You'd better not tell anyone! Don't tell your father.'

Years and years later, my father, four older brothers and I gather together the night before Mum's funeral and, after the boys pour accolades on me for managing to get meat and three veg on a plate for each of them, someone brings up 'the bus'.

'We didn't know you had it in you,' they say about the meal. None of my achievements has ever resulted in such praise from any of my family.

Turns out, Mum has done the bus routine with each of us and none of us has talked about it till now. We have all kept her secret.

Families ...



I was taken to a pantomime at the old Theatre Royal in Brisbane when I was five. I came home and apparently announced that I wanted to be on the stage. I don't remember this but my mother told me, over and over, as if to instil that memory. Perhaps I never said it. This was the beginning of my mother trying to live her life through me. It was always there, that pressure to please her. Nothing was ever enough. I was never enough.

She had wanted to be on the stage, but her father wouldn't allow it. She possessed a wonderful singing voice and I believe if she had really had the drive, she could have done it. Maybe I am being a little hard on her, saying that. In those days, a young woman was more likely to obey rather than rebel. She was born on 4 June 1913.

Mother, Grace Isabell Turner, nee Walker, did get a job, when she was a young girl, as a seamstress (she was a wonderful sewer and made all my clothes) and dresser for Bebe Scott, the half-sister of the great George Wallace, the wonderful Australian vaudeville star. Bebe was a well-known soubrette.

Mum was a fabulous raconteur. She spoke of dramas backstage, with Bebe and her boyfriend at the time, Mum having to cover the bruises from

punch-ups before matinee days. I lapped up every story with relish. Mum, Issie as she was called, was a very funny woman. I used to love her stories, not only about backstage with Bebe, and there were countless tales of those, but the others about her early life.

She had a large family, sisters Florence, Nellie, and Pauline, brothers, Bill, Ernie and Mason. Mum was in the middle, Pauline was the youngest.

Mum always talked of how poor they were. Certainly, the war had brought on hard times. However, my grandfather, William, was a wool classer, and much admired, though he did like a drink. We would probably call him an alcoholic these days. His nickname was Ducky. He loved to go shooting, ducks in particular. Makes me feel ill to think of that, shooting and killing for sport. Ducky had a car in those early days, so really, how poor could they have been?

Mum had a knack for using drama for the best effects. She loved telling the story about going for a drive with the family when she was a small child, her sitting on a fruit box, with holes in her sweater. I have to question her version. Much more dramatic to be the forgotten child, not dressed properly ... and without a proper seat! Still, I laughed every time she told of their driving along and her father suddenly saying, as he saw a car wheel rolling off into the bushes, 'Some poor sod has lost a wheel! That'll ruin their day.'

Suddenly, their car ground to a halt.

Mum shrieked, 'It was our wheel!!!' We laughed like drains every time.

She shared many stories, like the time she went to the local pool and asked a nice looking woman in the change room to mind her clothes. When she returned, the woman and Mum's things were gone. Mum had to walk all the way home in her bathing costume, with not even a towel to cover her up. She received glares from passers-by. It was certainly not the done thing for a young woman to be 'almost naked' in the street in those days.

Then there was the time she was at the vaudeville. She didn't have any extra money for sweets at interval. She noticed a well-dressed gentleman standing near the entrance. Mum stood next to him and pretended to cry. Real tears ... such an actress!

'What's wrong, young lady?'

'I've lost my fare home.'

The nice gentleman handed her some coins and she went straight over, almost in front of him, silly her, and bought an ice cream. She felt hands on her shoulders, as he whipped her around to face him and shouted, 'I'm getting the police onto you!'

Mum used to relish telling how she slipped out of his clutches and ran off, with her ice cream intact.

'I was far too quick for him!' she would laugh as she recalled the incident.

She relayed all these stories as if she were a professional comedienne. I was enthralled every time. She also managed to include a new 'bit' each time to add to each story. I believe she did have talent. Her timing was excellent. You can't teach that.

My grandmother Helena died from an asthma attack, when Mum was very young. I never knew that until Auntie Nellie told me years later at my mother's funeral. I have asthma too. I don't really know anything about Helena. She was gone from the family's lives so soon that there were no funny stories, no memories really, of her existence.

So, as happened a lot back then, the eldest daughter, Florrie, stayed home, gave up any thought of a life of her own and virtually brought up the children. She died at twenty-eight from kidney disease, having had no life to speak of. My cousin, Carol, Auntie Pauline's daughter, told me poor Florrie lost her sight towards the end of her life.

Growing up, we lived at 51 Wedd Street, Spring Hill, Brisbane, an inner-city working-class suburb, which is quite 'chi chi' now. The cottage is still there, dwarfed by high rises. When I go to Brisbane, I always find time to go there, sit out the front of the house in a car. Invariably, I burst into tears. I feel a sense of loss for those early years in Spring Hill; while lots of those memories are not good at all, your mind tends to play tricks on you, as you get older. The yearning for the old days comes from a happy place. Reality is pushed to the back of your mind. The bad memories are buried deeply within you as you try to search for meaning, a reason for it all.

After the panto and my alleged declaration of stage ambitions, I was sent to ballet class at age five, to Desley Horton's suburban dance studio. It was

a trek to the suburbs for dance class. More bus horrors.

My mother had it in her mind that I would become a great ballerina. 'Everything's lovely. It's so glamorous! You get a huge bouquet at the end of the performance. You choose one rose and give it to your dance partner. Everyone wants to be you.'

This was her fantasy, not mine. Mum loved that all the costumes are pretty and everything looks so clean up on the stage at the ballet. She banged on about cleanliness her whole life. She thought sex was dirty. She loved everything nice and clean and well scrubbed. With her ongoing strange behaviour, it is not a stretch to imagine that Mum might well have been abused sexually as a child.

So, I was to be her little ballerina. I was not allowed to play any more. I had to practise. I remained with Miss Horton for a few years, before going to the great Phil Danaher, where my dance skills blossomed. At Miss Horton's, I was in a ballet group called 'The Little Five'. We soon appeared on television on a children's show called *Cottee's Happy Hour*. By then we were the Channel 7 Junior Ballet ... my first job in show business at seven.

One day I recall some children visiting next door and Mum, for some inexplicable reason, allowing me to play with them. This was unheard of. She certainly never let me play again after this day.

For weeks she had been making huge butterfly wings, sewing, gluing, painting, for a duo I was to do on television with a girl from dance class, Margaret Ross. Up until then, I had only appeared in 'group' numbers. So, Mother saw this as a big opportunity to shine. Her little ballerina was in the making. Of course, as fate would have it, the one time I was allowed to play, I broke my left elbow, and I am left-handed, so it turned out to be a big problem for me for a number of weeks. Dad was getting ready to take me to the hospital. I was crying in pain, with my bone having been displaced. Mother, on the other hand, was shouting at me, 'You'd better not come back with plaster on that arm, my girl! You won't be able to do the butterfly dance!'

I was in a cast for six weeks. Mum made me sit and watch Margaret Ross do a solo version of the butterfly dance the next week. She was furious.

'That should've been you up there! That is the end of games for you, my girl.'

In 2018, while doing a concert in Brisbane, I received a note from Margaret Ross, who was in the audience. She came backstage and it was great to see her after all those years. She remembered the incident well as her one claim to fame! We laughed. It was lovely to see her again and to come full circle.

Mum did take me to see wonderful ballets. There were some good times. She took me to see Margot Fonteyn and we waited at stage door, with autograph book in hand, for what seemed like hours. When Miss Fonteyn eventually emerged, looking and smelling divine, I was too shy to ask for her autograph. Miss Fonteyn brushed past me and the scent of that perfume filled the air. You know, I have searched for years for that perfume to no avail. All these years later, I just have to close my eyes and I can smell it as if it happened yesterday.

I haven't spoken about my father. Leo Noel Turner was an only child, born in 1914. His family was from Dalby in Queensland. He was brought up Catholic, but changed to Anglican when he married my mother. Dad was a kind, though weak man. When he drank he became violent. My brothers always said that Mum egged him on. I disagree. There is never an excuse for hitting a woman.

I remember arguments, like when Dad picked up one end of the tablecloth of a perfectly set dinner table and pulled it out aggressively, so that plates, food, cups went flying, smashing into pieces, hitting the walls, tomato sauce everywhere, everything in total disarray. He then said to Mum in a rough, loud voice, 'Now, clean it up!'

The vision of Mum crying, on her hands and knees, trying to clean the total mess, has never left me.

He never hit me. Before I was born, if one of the boys was naughty, he would line them up and belt them all for good measure. By the time I came along that had ceased. However, many a time we would be at Emergency getting stitches in Mum's head or some such.

And yet, Dad loved his family and wanted us all to get along. We didn't, especially the boys. There were many holes in the walls from missed punches from my brothers' fights. Such a lot of violence and alcohol! Dad drank a lot. So did Ralph and Noel. They weren't happy drunks. I have observed this

over the years with a few friends. Everything is going along pleasantly, until that person has one more drink, and everything changes and that person becomes Mr Hyde.

It is easy to toss it off and blame 'the drink'. But are these people, in this case my father and two older brothers, being their true selves when sober, and alcohol switches something in the brain, or is the violent, loaded-up-with-alcohol person the real true self? I don't know.

Alcohol played a large part in my family dynamic. Mum didn't drink, except on special occasions, when she would have a shandy. I have never been a big drinker. I saw what it could do. In fact, every time the family got together there was a fight of some kind. There is one surviving photo of our whole family at my brother Ray's wedding. I was a teenager and the bridesmaid. That snap was taken just before an embarrassing punch-up between Ralph and Noel at Lennons Hotel in Brisbane. None of the boys liked Noel. I don't know why.

I hated Christmas. I dreaded it. It meant much drinking, followed by an argument and physical violence. Every year. To this day, I really don't like that time of year ... all the family movies that are shown, the advertisements about happy families. It is all too much when you have never had those close family moments and you feel inadequate. I wished I had been born into another family. Sometimes I pretended I was. I made up stories and dance routines and the notion of an altogether different life. 'Maybe I was adopted. I am not like any of them.'

There were no baby photos of me. It was only when I grew up I realised that we were poor. That was the reason for the lack of photos. They probably didn't own a camera.

I know we didn't have a phone until I was a teenager. When television came to Queensland, we rented a set you had to put coins in to make it work. We had it for years. Often you'd be in the middle of a favourite show when the TV would go clunk and switch off, as there were no more coins left. We missed the end of many a good show.

Dad was a truck driver, so he was away a lot. Mum had to manage the finances, something she did not do well. She bought fabric all the time to make dresses for me. She spent money wildly on things we could hardly

afford. I have inherited that quality from her. I have never been good with money, unfortunately. However, I am generous with money, as my mother was. I cannot bear meanness or miserable people. Life is too short. It was Mike Todd, one of Elizabeth Taylor's husbands who said, 'I have been broke many times in my life, but I have never been poor. Being poor is a state of mind.'

Dad was always away working. In the school holidays, Dad would take me in his truck sometimes and we'd stay overnight in a motel. Mum would pack sandwiches for us. I had my own lunch box. I loved sitting up there in the cabin and spending some time with my father. I did love him. I was his only little girl. When he was sober, he was a very gentle man. I was scared of Mr Hyde. What made him drink and become violent with Mum? Why did he turn after a few drinks? Was it something that was genetic and therefore passed on to my brothers? Whatever, it really was like living with two entirely different fathers.

Sometimes, when Dad had a bit to drink, not too much, he used to say our real name was Dunne, not Turner. Mum would stand behind him and mouth, 'Don't take any notice. He's drunk.'

We knew Grannie, Dad's mother, who lived down the road with Maggie, Dad's cousin, in a tiny, dark cottage that looked like it was part of a frightening fairytale. All of my other grandparents had died before my birth. We visited Grannie often, until she died when I was quite young. Maggie died soon after.

Many years later when Dad died, two years after Mum, we received his death certificate and it said Dad's name was Leo Dunne. After looking at Mum and Dad's wedding certificate at the same time, it stated that his mother, Kathleen, was deceased at the time of their wedding. So who was Grannie? Was Dad adopted or merely taken care of by this woman we called Grannie? Did the Dunes, being a rural, Catholic family, disown Kathleen after she became pregnant and then she travelled to Brisbane? Dad's father, Grannie's husband, had a fruit barrow and was arrested after a fight one day and dumped in a cell overnight, where he died from his injuries. All of this happened before I was born.

After a little research, I have found out that Kathleen, dad's birth mother,

had a daughter before Dad but she died at two months of age. She also had a daughter three years after she had Dad. That girl died at age two. No father's names appear on any of Kathleen's children's birth certificates. At what time then did Grannie start taking care of Dad? Dad clearly remembered his birth mother because Dad used to sing to me when I was a baby. He'd sing, 'I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen' and he used to say it was his mother Kathleen's favourite song. As he began the song, apparently my bottom lip would tremble and I would begin to weep. Obviously, my appreciation of the emotion and the power of music was present at an early age. Maybe it was Dad's singing voice that moved me as a baby. He had been part of a barbershop quartet in his youth and he did play the harmonica very well. Whatever it was, this baby girl had a great appreciation of what music can do for the soul.

Clearly, the Turners had either formally or informally adopted my father. His birth and death certificates say his name was Leo Neal Dunne, but he was Leo Noel Turner at the time he married my mother in 1936.

All of this remains a mystery. I'm sure someone knew, but they are all gone now. I may still have family in Dalby. Those never-spoken-of family secrets are really fascinating.

I think my mother loved my father, although it was hardly a happy marriage. One of her brothers, I think Uncle Mason, brought him to their house. She used to speak of the first time she saw Dad walking down the street in a sailor's outfit (goodness knows why as he was not in the armed forces) and she spoke of his bell-bottom trousers swinging as he walked, obviously a very exciting memory for her.

They married at All Saints Anglican Church at Wickham Terrace in Brisbane. Mum often talked of her shame about Catholic nuns turning up at the house when she was pregnant with Ralph, my eldest brother, accusing her of living in sin, as she was not married in the Catholic Church. If you do the addition, Ralph was born about seven months after their wedding, an absolute 'no-no' in those times.

My brothers' names were Ralph Gordon, Noel William, Raymond Mason, and Leigh Geoffrey. Really, my parents had two families. The three older

boys were born two years apart. Then six years passed. Then Leigh was born and four years later, I came along. So, Leigh and I grew up together, as if we were the only two children in the family.

Mum said she hid away for most of her pregnancy with me, because women of that age shouldn't be having babies, code for shouldn't be having sex. She was thirty-seven. In fact, as I have suggested, Mum was uneasy about anything to do with sex. We were never allowed to have our bedroom doors closed for instance. We'd be up to no good.

Mum said to me once, many years later, 'Those orgasm things. I never had one of those.' It was such a sad statement. She had blurted it out.

I think that conversation took place around the same time Mum was taking a course in ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging, so she thought she had her finger on the pulse of what it was to be a modern woman. Hence her sharing of that fact! I wish I had had the foresight to question her a little more. I regret it. This was the only time my mother had ever been so open with me about anything sexual.

I believe with all my being that Mum must have been abused. How else can I explain the bus horrors? And why did being on the bus trigger this memory? Something really bad had happened to her and it informed the rest of her life.

I was one of those girls who thought I was dying when I got my first period. I hid in my room after hiding my underwear. Later, I heard Mum shouting, 'Geraldine! Come here!' Naturally, I was scared.

I knew she must have found the underwear. I started to cry. She shoved a book into my hands and told me to read it. That was that.

Mum went to the doctor, Doctor Marks, only once before I was born, and he told her, 'I think we are storing up a little bundle for heaven.'

What a thing to say! Mum thought I would be stillborn. How wrong was that doctor. I popped out, very much alive, and with the biggest brown eyes. My brother Noel, twelve at the time, apparently said, 'Get the bewdy lights on her!'

I can only imagine the joy of having a girl at last, after four boys, but the suffocation that was to follow and the inability to please my mother has coloured my life. I was named Geraldine Gail (Mum wanted to spell it

Gale, as I was born in a storm, but they got the spelling wrong on the birth certificate) and it was on 23 June 1950.

My early childhood was filled with ballet class and practice. I must have been taken by my mother to see musical films, as I often used to walk down the street, breaking into song and my own choreography, wondering why the passers-by didn't know the choreography somehow, like they did in the movies, and join in. It made me a little cross that they hadn't bothered to step up, take responsibility and learn it.

At home, apart from the regular domestic violence, which made me go very quiet and try to disappear, and the continuing odd behaviour of my mother, I loved ironing day. Mum would sit me on the ironing table and we'd play a game. I would say a word, and she would sing a song with that word in the first line. She knew more songs than anyone I have ever known. She possessed a lovely, quite naturally open singing voice, with a soprano range and a great belt. She understood phrasing as well.

I had two toys, a teddy bear, which I still have, and a beautiful doll named Rosemary, which had long blonde plaits. Oh I loved her. I think Leigh and I had a skirmish one day and Rosemary was damaged. Mum took her to the doll hospital and I never saw her again. I kept asking, then gave up and quietly resented Mum for it. I realised only when I grew up that Mum probably couldn't afford to have the doll fixed.

She lied to me about the dentist as well. She said he was going to put some ointment in my mouth to stop my toothache. I woke up, having had gas and eight teeth removed, bending over a basin, coughing up blood. Maybe she was attempting to protect me, but it sure didn't feel like that.

They're skewed sometimes, the things you think as a child. Every Christmas, Dad's work (he worked for Cobb & Co) had a big party. Santa came and each of the children of the workers was called up to receive a gift from Santa. I used to see fabulous presents - bikes (I was never allowed to have a bike. I might fall off and not be able to dance) dolls, doll's houses - given to other children, while I would receive a tiny offering like crayons and a colouring book. I wondered for all those years why Santa didn't like me very much. I was good, wasn't I? I tried to be better each year, but it didn't make any difference. I still received insignificant gifts from Santa. Of

course, it depended on the amount of money the parents contributed each year, but how was I to know that? It's a bit rough growing up thinking Santa doesn't like you. I imagined I was on the naughty list and had no idea why.

Not long after I met my husband, Brian, who is a kind soul at heart, I told him about losing Rosemary, my beloved doll and how it had affected me. The next time he came back from a trip to Melbourne, he had bought me a beautiful blonde-haired doll from a wonderful doll shop that used to be in the Block Arcade. He had told the shop assistant the story and emphasised that he knew it couldn't ever replace Rosemary, but that he felt the need to do something. So, darling Millie lives in my study to this day. She sits on the piano, looking quite happy to be there. She has blonde hair and a lovely, expressive face, just like my Rosemary. She sits next to my teddy. Brian's mother made a lovely checked jacket and bow tie for him to freshen him up. He likes it.

Throughout my very early years, my mother had a friend called Norie Coghlan. I have no idea how they met. It was a strange friendship by today's standards as they never went out together, or met for afternoon tea, or to go shopping. Norie used to come to our house when we lived at Spring Hill, each day after work at around six o'clock. She often sat in the bathroom as I took my bath, talking to Mum, but mostly, they would sit at the kitchen table and have a cup of tea and talk of everyday things. Norie was a secretary, who had lost her fiancé to a car accident. Actually, he had been run over and killed. Mum told us that he was a married man and that Norie could never have married him. That was never talked about. None of us ever let on to Norie that we knew that Frank, her fiancé, was married.

Norie lived in a rather grand house up on Gregory Terrace, with her sister, Bridie. Norie was a tiny, feisty Irish woman. The reason I mention her at all is to speak of my mother's kindness. When we moved to Annerley, those daily visits ceased. I guess they kept in touch over the years, and saw each other sometimes, perhaps going to a matinee of a show together, because when I was in my final year of school, studying for my final exams, Norie moved in with us. I don't know what had happened to Bridie by then, but it was made known to my mother and father that Norie had dementia and had no-one to

take care of her. They immediately took her in. She lived with us for about a year, with Mum fussing over her and being genuinely kind to her, kinder than I had ever seen her be to anyone.

Norie often disappeared and Mum would search the streets endlessly in Dutton Park, where we first rented after we lost our house in Annerley. Mum always found Norie, brought her home and bathed her, while Norie mumbled irrationally about her Frank, as if he were still alive.

It was distracting for me during my final school exams, to have Norie hanging about outside my bedroom, talking constantly to herself. It was disconcerting as she could be discovered lurking outside your room, or wandering up and down the hallway in the middle of the night. We got through it all until one day, not long after my exams, Norie took a turn, a stroke, and she was carted away in an ambulance. She died not long after. It was a sad end.

As Dad would have done, Mum would give a person the last coins in her purse, or indeed stretch a meal to include anyone in need. It was an extremely good quality to possess, one that I am happy to have inherited. They both possessed an innate social conscience.

Meanwhile, at ballet, I auditioned for my first big professional job, *Aladdin*, produced by Tibor Rudas, who was the producer of the Three Tenors many years later.

It was a matinee show performed each day. Hazel Phillips, Australian actress and TV personality, was Aladdin. Each night, a variety show called *Oriental Cavalcade* played. Will Mahoney, American comedian and the great musical star Evie Hayes's husband, was in the show, as were sight acts like Joe Ballangue, whose act was playing the mouth organ with his nose while smoking a cigarette or eating a banana. I was entranced. To this day, I love sight acts. I still have his autograph, which includes his signature and a hand-drawn harmonica.

Everything about being a part of the show was so exciting, especially the time I was chosen to be in my costume at night, before *Oriental Cavalcade*, as a cigarette girl, carrying a tray full of cigarettes in the foyer, to hand out free to the 'ladies'. I was eight years old. Wouldn't pass the pub test these days!

My very first line on the professional stage was to a character called 'So Shy'. It was the intro to a number of hers: 'Please sing for us, So Shy.'

I remember the smell of greasepaint, as you entered the stage door of Her Majesty's Theatre in Brisbane, and the rickety stairs up to the dressing rooms. That was the beginning of my love affair with theatres and empty stages. Even today, I am always the first to arrive at the theatre for a performance. I always have been very early, to everything, but especially to work. I love to walk out onto the empty stage before a performance and just ... be. Before anyone arrives, apart from stage crew, I imagine all those who came before me. It is a way to honour the past and all the ghosts who spur me on to do my best each night.

Of course I also remember lining up each Thursday for our pay packets. I bought a gold watch from my earnings.

When my brother Leigh was thirteen, and I was nine, he was allowed to catch the bus to town with a friend to go to the pictures in the holidays. I must have performed 'something shocking' this day for Mum to tell Leigh he had to take me. He was given enough money for the movie tickets and the bus fare and an ice cream each. After the movie, I had dropped something, so crawled under my seat to look for it. When I got up I couldn't see Leigh or his friend. I walked to the foyer. They were nowhere. So I decided to walk home. I remember clearly that I was not scared. I had a great sense of direction. Even now, I can revisit a city and find a restaurant or shop I visited years before.

I knew which way the bus went, as I had stared out the window for years on end with Mother and her dramas on the bus. So I walked and walked. It was a few miles. It was dark by the time I arrived home. I could hear Mum and Dad shouting at and belting poor Leigh, who was wailing.

'Where is she? Where is she?'

'I don't know.' Leigh was awash with tears.

'I'm home. It's okay,' I piped up.

I don't remember any relief or hugs. I never remembered hugs. Mum didn't touch us much. I know that Leigh was not forgiven for some time and it was certainly the end of trips to town without Mum.

Sometimes, Mum would take me to The Shingle Inn in Edward Street

after ballet class. That was sheer bliss. I loved it there, the waitresses with perky caps and uniforms, with crisp, frilly aprons, and the sign, which read, 'We use real butter in all our cakes'.

It was always a treat to visit. The owners had a similar restaurant called, Haddon Hall in George Street, but it wasn't as exciting as The Shingle Inn. Mum would treat me to a fairy cake, or a scone with jam and cream, or a sponge. The restaurant had booths and lovely wooden panelling. You always noticed older women, alone, ordering the roast of the day. This was a time when a single woman would not usually eat in a restaurant alone, wouldn't ever consider it. But The Shingle Inn spelt safety for a single woman, and the weekly opportunity to have a roast dinner. No person who lived alone would ever bother to cook an entire roast for herself.

The Shingle Inn has gone now, but on a recent visit to Brisbane, in November 2020, to appear in the Lord Mayor's Gala Concert, I arrived at rehearsal and noticed a sign at the Town Hall. It seems The Shingle Inn is being reconstructed within the Town Hall, using the original wood panelling. It won't be the same, but I look forward to going there in the future. I do hope they make the same cakes. Their passionfruit sponge was always a winner for me. I am longing to see the old sign, 'We use real butter in all our cakes'.