

The Gloves Are Off

Maggie Kirkpatrick

THE GLOVES ARE OFF

The inside story

– from *Prisoner* to *Wicked*



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The unconditional love of Caitlin, Daniel and Megan is what has defined me and kept me going.

There is one thing I have always wanted to say ...

Thanks to everyone I have ever worked with for making me look so good.

FOREWORD

THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

You'd never describe Maggie Kirkpatrick as 'the girl next door', but, to me, she was literally the girl next door.

It was the mid-seventies and I lived in Edgecliff Road, Woollahra, in an apartment building which had two basement flats. One was my friend David Penfold and I, and the other was Maggie, her husband Kirk and their tiny daughter Caitlin (already in bowler-hat, tap dancing on her parent's coffee-table!).

We shared the courtyard between our apartment – very suitable for parties. In fact, a friend of ours used to put up electric radiators in the trees and dub the soirées, 'tropical garden parties!' We didn't care as long as the flagons were plentiful, and the courtyard was filled with theatrical friends and lots of loud show music. Raucous showtunes often lingered into the night. As the night gave way to morning, Maggie would fling open her window and scream out to Penfold and me, 'For God's sake. It's three o'clock in the morning. Turn the music *up!*'

I was working on the daily *Mike Walsh Show* as a segment producer and our job was to go and find likely guests to appear on the show. There wasn't the industry of talk-show personalities in those days so to search them out one would have to go to parties, meet weird and wonderful folk and invite them to come on the show to talk about their lives. I remember meeting people who we billed as 'stripper turned poetess' or, 'legless ballroom dancers', or the elusive, 'laughing lesbian'.

Maggie was booked as 'the loud shoe saleslady'. (She was of course a very

well-known actress but to the *Mike Walsh* audience she was a shop assistant who had some very funny and outrageous stories of shoe shop secrets!

Maggie and Mike hit it off immediately – they nicknamed each other’s tipping alter-egos ‘Syd’ and ‘Pearl’. Whenever we needed someone to be fun and funny we would give Maggie a call and she would ring her employer and say that her bunions were playing up and she could be found on the *Mike Walsh Show* that day at noon!

Mike eventually cast her as one of the leads in his production of *Anything Goes*, playing one of her ‘grande dame’ characters. For someone so down to earth, it’s funny how Maggie keeps playing society matrons in musicals like *Irene* and *Anything Goes*.

Of course, our next-door neighbour was a fine actress but had yet to make it to the big time. This seemed to loom with the imminent production of the musical *Chicago* which Richard Wherrett was directing for the Sydney Theatre Company, starring Geraldine Turner and Nancye Hayes.

Maggie thought that she would be perfect for the part of Matron Mama Morton, the very fierce and butch warden at The Cook County Jail. Mama was in charge of the ‘merry murderesses’, Velma Kelly and Roxy Hart. Maggie learned the song, ‘When You’re Good to Mama’, and would rehearse it every day and every night in front of Penfold and I. We would give her notes and make sure she was ready for the audition. Well, on the day of the audition she went in did the song perfectly, and the director said, ‘Sorry, Maggie. You play socialites. No one is going to believe you as a fierce, butch, prison guard!’ So, Maggie didn’t get the part but a year or so later she morphed into *Prisoner’s* Joan Ferguson – The Freak – and proved Mr Wherrett’s predictions very, very wrong!

David Penfold and I had built up quite a reputation producing drag shows at the club Capriccios on Oxford Street in the days of ‘arson and amyl nitrate’. The thing that set our shows apart was that we created full mini-musicals and hired top actors to voice the characters in the shows.

The very first one we did was *Which Witch is Which?*, loosely based on *The*

Wizard of Oz. We had Jeanne Little voice the character of Dorothy, whom we called ‘Mabel’ because there was a show called *Mack and Mabel* and we wanted to use the song, ‘Look What Happened to Mabel’ as the finale, so suddenly it was Mabel who went over the rainbow and not Dorothy. No one in the audience seemed to care!

Toni Lamond voiced Rosie Glow, ‘The squeaky-clean, Good Witch’ and Maggie Kirkpatrick was cast as Karen, ‘The Wicked Witch of the Western Suburbs’. At one point in the show, when Mabel has been captured by the Wicked Witch, Maggie had to snap at the flying monkeys, ‘Shut up, you ignorant baboons!’. To which the Monkeys (voiced by Tony Sheldon and me), shot back, ‘We’re not baboons! We’re gibbons!’. Maggie answered, ‘Okay, Pamela. Take Mabel somewhere where nobody ever goes. Take her to the ladies’ toilet!’. These jokes might seem impenetrable nowadays but were hilarious to an audience in 1974 who knew Pamela Gibbons was a famous actress – one of Maggie’s co-stars in the musical *Irene* – and who appreciated the fact that the ladies’ toilet was the most deserted place in the whole of the gay club!

Well for Maggie, this gig was a ‘set and forget’. It was the drag queens who had to come in every night to mime her voice. That was until the next show, *Cinderella* which had already been recorded prior to rehearsals. Geraldine Turner had already recorded one of the ugly sisters’ voices with classic lines like, ‘Is that Hortense?’, ‘No. She looks quite calm to me!’. But how Maggie ended up on stage every night in a drag show is one of the marvellous stories in this volume.

Maggie has an easy writing style and tells her story with charm, honesty and great good humour. She invests the highs and lows of her life with equal sincerity and insight. This came as no surprise to me as I had worked as co-writer on Maggie’s first biographical outing, *The Screw is Loose*, a cabaret which played at Woolloomooloo’s legendary pub venue, The Tilbury.

On stage and screen and now, in print, Maggie is a true original. She’s a dear and treasured friend. Of course, she can be a daunting dame at times

and, as ‘The Freak’ has managed to inject naked fear in the hapless viewers simply by donning those menacing leather gloves.

However, don’t be daunted as you turn the page. I guarantee you’re going to relax and enjoy the experience, now that *The Gloves Are Off!*

David Mitchell
May 2019

David Mitchell

David most recently co-wrote *Doris: So Much More Than the Girl Next Door* with the show’s star, Melinda Schneider. *Doris* has played successful seasons in Brisbane, Melbourne, Adelaide and at The Sydney Opera House.

With Melvyn Morrow, David co-wrote *Shout! The Legend of the Wild One*, starring David Campbell. in 2000, when it broke box-office records around Australia.

David was also co-writer of the successful musical production, *Dusty*, which grossed twenty-five million dollars and won four Helpmann Awards in 2006, and Melbourne’s Green Room Award for Best New Australian Production.

David has written for Barbra Streisand, Bob Hope, Michael Parkinson, Barry Humphries, Clive James, Ronnie Corbett, Lorna Luft, and the late Danny la Rue.

A prolific freelance television producer, David’s shows include, *The Mike Walsh Show*, *Parkinson*, *Saturday Night Clive*, *The Dame Edna Experience*, *Barry Humphries’ Flashbacks* and *This is Your Life*.

His Royal Bicentennial Concert in 1988 which starred Olivia Newton-John, Peter Allen and Kylie Minogue, amongst many others, was described by showbiz bible, *Variety*, as, ‘pure, unremitting, unalloyed, entertainment!’.

He is currently devising a one-man show with Cameron Daddo.

CHAPTER ONE

BIRTH AND CONSEQUENCES

I have a fairly comprehensive history of my father’s family, a little of my maternal grandfather’s history and until very recently virtually nothing of my maternal grandmother.

Information has come my way regarding ‘Clan Campbell’ which was my grandmother’s maiden name. Family secrets were uncovered, and I found it fascinating.

My grandmother was born in 1873 in Bungaree, on or around the goldfields of Ballarat. She was christened Christina Catherine. Her parents were Peter and Caroline Campbell. Peter had been born in the parish of Dunoon-Kilmun, Argyllshire, Scotland in 1835 and migrated to Australia between 1853 -1860. He married Catherine Bennett in 1873. Catherine was the seventh child of Isaac and Ann Bennett. Isaac Bennett, my great, great grandfather had been transported to the colonies in 1835, arriving on the *Recovery* February 26, 1836. He had been sentenced in the Essex Quarter Sessions to seven years for embezzlement.

I recall asking my mother, years ago, about the family history. She intimated that a member of her family had done a little research and horror, horror, a convict was found! Back then it was considered a terrible blot on family names. Nowadays, it seems to be a badge worn with pride. I for one am certainly delighted.

Another little piece of unknown family history is the fact that my grandmother in 1896 gave birth to Alfred Thomas Campbell who was raised as a member of Peter and Caroline Campbell’s family. An illegitimate child

absorbed into the family was not unknown. I believe that my mother has gone to her grave not knowing that she had another brother. Alfred is listed as the eighth child of Peter and Catherine.

I am intrigued by a little snippet of research that shows in almost all cases, either side of my family history, births of offspring almost without exception were within a very few months of a marriage taking place. It seems that my daughter Caitlin and I, making our own choices, would both avoid the 'shotgun wedding'.

And so, we come to January 1941.

War was raging in Europe. The population of Australia was 7,109,898. RG Menzies was Prime Minister, FDR was inaugurated for the third time as President of the USA. Classic films such as *The Maltese Falcon* were released, Billie Holiday was singing 'God Bless the Child'; 'Chattanooga Choo Choo' was a best seller on Top of The Pops. The destruction of Pearl Harbour brought the U.S.A into the war later in the year.

Ginger Rogers won best actress Oscar for *Kitty Foyle*.

James Stewart won best actor Oscar for *Philadelphia Story*.

Rebecca, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, won best film Oscar.

Average cost of a house was \$4,075.

Average annual wage was \$1,750.

Churchill launched his 'V' for Victory' campaign across Europe.

The classic Orson Welles film, *Citizen Kane* premiered.

Placido Domingo, Paul Anka and Neil Diamond were born.

The evacuation of allied soldiers from Dunkirk in northern France took place with the loss of many lives, in spite of the valiant efforts of coastal Britons and their volunteering of small boats.

In Albury, NSW, Crissie Downs (nee Davies) gave birth to a baby girl, Margaret Ann Downs. I was born on Wednesday January 29 around 7.00 a.m. at Meramie Private Hospital.

My father, Alfred James Downs, was serving in North Africa with the 2nd/32nd AIF soon to be at Tobruk.

Crissie was a country girl born in Tasmania and raised in Grenfell, NSW. She was the youngest of five children born to Christina Campbell and William Davies. From working in a haberdashery store in Grenfell, she was transferred to Rutherglen, Victoria, to manage a branch of that store.

It was here she met my father. He was a handsome, devil-may-care man-about-town. He worked in the Great Southern mine, served in the Militia and played Australian rules football for Rutherglen Football Club. His mother, Annie, ran a local pub, The Royal Standard and he was the eldest of ten children – eight girls and two boys.

The Downs family in North East Victoria were descended from Enoch Downs (1831-1883) who, as an adventurous 21-year-old, had arrived in Australia with the hope of finding his fortune on the goldfields of Victoria. He had come from the Potteries region of Staffordshire in Northwest England. It was expected that he, like all in his family before him, would become a potter. The Downs family history in that region dates back to 1651 with Guilielmus Downs. We always assumed that he too was from the North West of England.

It was into this family that I arrived. The first grandchild. Crissie and I took up residence in the pub.

My mother told me that we were housed in great-grandfather Young's room, situated beyond the back bar of this single-storey pub. Apparently it was not uncommon for the room to be used as an escape route when the local constable raided after-hours drinkers. These escapades might well have been my first, but certainly not last, encounters with drunks.

Family myth has it that my dummy was often dipped in gin to pacify me. Oh dear, was that the start of it all? My lifelong 'affiliation' with pubs and alcohol.

So it was that my life began surrounded by loving adults. Eight aunts – Noel (Noakie), Nancy, Lola, Wilma, Joan, Mavis, Ailsa, Gwenda and, a teenage uncle, Stanley (Sonny), my dotting grandmother Anne Downs (nee Young), and my beautiful mother, Crissie. I take it I was rather spoiled by all this attention and even at around the age of two or three I was known to

stand on the bar of the pub and sing wartime songs such as 'Brown Slouch Hat' and 'Bell Bottom Trousers', obviously loving the attention lavished on me by all. My mother always called me 'Margaret', but my grandmother and aunts persisted with the diminutive, Peggy – a throwback to Irish forebears somewhere along the line, no doubt.

But back to 1941 – August 10 to be exact.

On a beach in North Africa, my father was killed.

Having been in the trenches for weeks on end, beach parties were organised so that the men could wash and rid themselves of lice and whatever other ghastly things affected them. On this day, my father, Lieutenant Alfred James Downs, was the Officer of the Day and took a small group of his men to the sea shore that they might give themselves some respite from the trenches. After washing away the filth, they sat down on the beach to dry off and were attacked. My father died instantly. As I understand it, he and his men were picked off by an Italian sniper.

Two other members of the group died the next day. I don't know any more than that.

Back in Australia, my then 24-year-old mother was facing a life without Jim. So, there she was, in a country town with a new baby and a large but very new family of in-laws. What could have been going through her mind? As related to me by my mother, it appears that on the day she received the news of my father's death she had experienced a feeling of unease throughout the day. To relieve this, she put me in my pram and took off to visit friends. Curiously, wherever she went, no one was at home. This added to her feeling of foreboding. On returning home, a visit from the local Church of England minister brought her the news.

I was never really able to ascertain just what her immediate reaction was.

One thing I am sure of is that her strongest will was about to be put to the test as she faced raising a child on her own in the days when single mothers did it hard.

After a couple of years, John Anderson came into her life. He was a soldier just back from the Middle East and he was about to be sent on to the New Guinea campaign. He was stationed at Puckapunyal, 196 km from Rutherglen. Social activities for the entertainment of the troops stationed there were big events in the surrounding small towns. Rutherglen was no exception and the outgoing Downs family led by my gregarious gran Annie were in the thick of the socialising. Picnics by the Murray River, dances, and all manner of social activities. I'm sure all this was carried out with great fun and frivolity in spite of the wartime anxieties that must have been felt.

At one of these outings Crissie met John. I have no idea of the attraction between them. Crissie was a very attractive brunette who loved to dance. John, from all accounts, was quite shy. Originally from Newcastle, NSW, and previously married but now divorced, he was the eldest of three children. He had a sister Joan and a brother Bob, who at the time was a prisoner of war, taken by the Germans during the Crete campaign in Greece 1941, after the disastrous Greek campaign.

The late Lt-General John Coates summed up the campaign thusly:

'Yet, as in almost every Allied campaign in the early part of the war, the worst mistakes of the politicians and strategists were moderated by the bravery, fighting qualities and sheer dogged determination of the troops. Greece was no exception.'

The attraction between Crissie and John continued to blossom and, after a period of time, it was decided that my mother and I would move north to Newcastle, to be there when the war was over. I must have been about three at the time. Our departure was met with hostility by my aunts but apparently my grandmother simply said to my mother, 'Don't ever do anything to hurt Peggy' and gave us her blessing.

I like to think that my mother's whirlwind romance with my father had been the stuff that wartime romances are made of. The sense of urgency, of uncertainty, I'm sure added to heightened passions.

Perhaps I have simply been the victim of too many Hollywood movies.

I asked my mother, some forty years later, if Jim was the love of her life. Her answer brought tears to both of us as she agreed that he was indeed her Great Love. She also wondered if it would have lasted had he returned. It seems that his outlook on life was not as orderly as my mother's. My father, as already mentioned, had somewhat of a fun-loving, devil-may-care attitude – a prankster and one of the boys. Maybe that's where some of my somewhat incautious attitudes come from. Most unlike my mother's circumspect ways.

I have it on good authority from a friend of his whom I had the pleasure of meeting in Rutherglen. Colin Diffy was a local farmer, friend and senior officer who knew my father very well. He assured me that Jim was one of the finest men he had known. I am so pleased that I met this delightful gentleman before he passed away a little time later. He put my mind to rest regarding the character of the man I never knew.

So, it was off to Newcastle where the next twenty years would shape what was to become of my life.

CHAPTER TWO

STEEL CITY

Newcastle, the second city of NSW, is a beautiful coastal city – a former convict colony with some of the most spectacular beaches in Australia. It was also Australia's largest steel producing and shipping city. Coal from the Hunter Valley was shipped through the port of Newcastle all over the world. During the war it had been a target for the Japanese submarines that had been attacking the coastline and it had been shelled in June of 1942.

Newcastle was indeed a Steel City and the great mining company, BHP, was king. The wealth of the area was dependent on that great industry. In the retail businesses of the city it was most apparent. Fortnightly pay packets meant that every two weeks was mini boom time. Strikes in the coalfields or the factories affected everyone. Life was good, if perhaps a little parochial, but I, like many former Novocastrians, praise and defend it to this day.

Mum and I stayed with John's parents, Verlie, a gentle creative soul, and Tom, a sadistic brute who played the double bass in the city orchestra. He loathed me on sight and wouldn't allow me to eat at the table when he was at home. It was with Bulla the dog I took my meals when old Tom was around.

Eventually, Mum fostered me out to a middle-aged family with a teenage daughter. Because of Tom? I'm not sure. Perhaps it was simply that as she worked she wanted an orderly life for me in a friendly environment.

At least then she knew I was in caring hands when she was at work. The Audsley's filled that bill. Dick Audsley was too old to go into war service, so he was a bus driver – an essential service. My mother was then working