

State funeral for Barry Humphries, creator of Dame Edna Everage and other Australian caricatures

Richard Phillips
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In mid-December, eight months after his death, the veteran satirist, actor and writer Barry Humphries was given a joint Australian and New South Wales state funeral at the Sydney Opera House. Humphries, who had a seven-decade career in theatre, film and television, died on April 22 last year, age 89, after complications from hip surgery, following a fall at his Sydney home.

The state funeral, which was broadcast live on the government-funded ABC network, included perfunctory video messages from Labor Prime Minister Albanese and multi-billionaire media chief Rupert Murdoch. Tony Burke, Australia's minister for the arts and the minister for employment and workplace relations, read an amusing message from King Charles III.

Serious and heartfelt speeches were made by Humphries' two sons, Oscar and Rupert, film director Bruce Beresford and others. Video tributes from leading British music and entertainment personalities—comedians Rob Brydon, Jimmy Carr and David Walliams, as well as Elton John and Andrew Lloyd Webber, and celebrated musical theatre producer Cameron Mackintosh were screened, highlighting the broad scope of Humphries' creative influence.

Some of Humphries' favourite music from Germany's short-lived Weimar Republic, including songs composed by Hanns Eisler, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, were performed by the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Andrew Ross, Satu Vänskä and cabaret singer Meow Meow.

A master of the one-man show, Humphries is best known for his two-and-half-hour stage performances. These consisted of monologues from the wildly egotistical and ever-evolving Dame Edna Everage and the lecherous, perpetually drunk cultural diplomat Sir Les Patterson, along with original musical numbers, and improvisational and audience participation moments.

Everage, Patterson and other lesser-known Humphries' caricatures, such as Lance Boyle, a corrupt union official, and Sandy Stone, a suburban retiree with a droning voice and mind-numbing attention to pointless details, were invented to ridicule the smug insularity of establishment Australia in the 1950s and 1960s. Humphries once described Stone as Melbourne suburbia "talking in its sleep."

Edna Everage, originally created as a shy but narrow-minded working-class housewife from Moonee Ponds, and Les Patterson changed over the decades, becoming evergreens in Humphries' stage repertoire.

Everage was transformed into the so-called mega-star Dame Edna, her garish costumes and super-ego used to ridicule the emptiness of contemporary celebrity and other well-deserved targets. Her attitudes, glasses and clothes were evolving, Humphries once remarked, as part of her campaign for "world domination!"

Born in 1934, the first of four children, Humphries was intensely interested in painting, music, drama and vaudeville theatre from an early

age. He grew up in Melbourne's affluent eastern suburbs, attending Melbourne Grammar School and won a scholarship to the University of Melbourne to study law, philosophy and fine arts.

Humphries took little interest in these subjects, involving himself instead in student theatre, music, Dadaism and performance art, eventually dropping out to join the newly formed Melbourne Theatre Company. This was an embarrassment to his parents and particularly at odds with the dour and snobbish Church of England attitudes of his mother who had constantly reprimanded Barry during his childhood to stop "drawing attention" to himself.

Australia's wealthiest and upper-middle classes layers looked towards England during Humphries' childhood and teenage years. England was regarded as the "mother country" and anything or anybody that challenged this, or the British Empire, was regarded with suspicion.

"We were pretending we were in the home counties. We had nice churches, English gardens with nice lawns, crumpets for tea, teapots in the form of thatched cottages, pictures of Winston Churchill on the back of the kitchen door, and we subscribed to the Church of England," Humphries recalled.

Australia's first major exhibition of British and European contemporary art did not occur until 1939, five years after Humphries was born. The ground-breaking event, which included the works of Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani and Dali to name just a few, was an anathema to Australia's cultural establishment, which denounced it as the "product of degenerates and perverts."

Australian governments subjected literature, films and the visual arts to strict censorship with countless classic works banned until the early 1970s. The country's White Australia immigration policy remained in place until 1966, following the resignation of Liberal Party leader Robert Menzies, who had been the prime minister since 1949.

"The whole of our youth was steeped in legends" surrounding Australia's military involvement in the World War I invasion of Gallipoli, Humphries wrote in one autobiography. It was, however, "a bloody defeat from which Australians were encouraged to feel they had snatched some kind of glorious victory."

These sentiments were at odds with the political outlook of Humphries and other thoughtful artists and thousands of young people being radicalised by compulsory military conscription and the Vietnam War.

As previously noted, Dame Edna Everage and other Humphries' caricatures were designed to challenge Australia's mind-numbing cultural environment. In one of her first appearances, Edna is interviewed by an Australian immigration official about possibly accommodating international athletes for the 1956 Olympic Games in her suburban home. In line with the country's racist immigration policy, Edna rejects anyone staying in her home if they were not "white," "clean" or could "speak

English.” It was a damning indictment of government policy.

Humphries moved to Sydney in 1956, involving himself in experimental films, satirical revues and serious theatre, including appearing as Estragon in the first Australian production of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. It was a role, he later said, that changed his life.

He also recorded his first comedy album—*Wild Life in Suburbia*—at this time. The record’s liner notes were written by Robin Boyd, a writer and modernist architect whose book, *The Australian Ugliness* (1960), sharply opposed the bland but then dominant trends in architecture in popular culture.

In 1959, Humphries, like many other Australian artists of his generation, moved to London where he worked with all the key figures in post-WWII British comedy—Spike Milligan, Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller, Allan Bennett and Will Rushton—and others.

Humphries appeared in various West End stage shows, including the original production of *Oliver!*, and worked with New Zealand artist Nicholas Garland at *Private Eye* magazine to produce a regular comic strip—*The Wonderful World of Barry McKenzie*—about a loud-mouthed Australian living in the London. The strip was eventually transformed by director Beresford into a commercially successful but generally insufferable film, notwithstanding its cult status in some quarters.

While Humphries remained in Britain, expanding his work in television and other entertainment fields, he regularly toured Australia with his one-man shows. There were British and European tours and then in 2000 he achieved popular success in North America with *Dame Edna: The Royal Tour* show, which won Tonys for Best Play, Best Actor and Best Live Theatrical Act. Other television shows followed.

Dame Edna’s television appearances, where she invariably seized control from her interviewers, were legendary. Interviewers were generally kept in stitches of laughter as she dominated the entire show, interjecting with sly ego-puncturing barbs directed against the interviewer and their guests. “Important people” as one critic noted, “were made to feel ordinary and ordinary people made to feel important.”

While maintaining an acute and life-long hostility to national insularity and political humbug, Humphries was a political conservative, joining the editorial board of the right-wing *Quadrant* magazine in the mid-1970s and maintaining a life-long friendship with the Murdoch family.

Contrary to the philistinism of his over-the-top caricatures, Humphries was a complex and highly cultured individual with an extraordinary range of artistic interests and influences.

An obsessive bibliophile with a collection of over 25,000 rare books, Humphries was a musician, painter and writer, authoring over 20 books, including mock memoirs in the persona of Dame Edna, and two autobiographies—*More Please* (1992) and *My Life as Me* (2002). He appeared in 29 films, made nine audio recordings, received numerous awards in recognition of his decades of work and was still performing in 2022.

In 2016 and 2018, Humphries sponsored and appeared in an international tour featuring cabaret songs from the Weimar Republic and including classical works by Jewish composers suppressed by Hitler’s Nazi regime. The production, a collaboration between the Australian Chamber Orchestra and singer Meow Meow, celebrated that brief period of artistic creativity in Germany between the end of the First World War and the accession of Hitler.

The show brought Humphries full circle and back to the late 1940s when as a teenager he purchased a folder of sheet music once owned by a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany. The collection, which included works by Erich Korngold, Kurt Weill and Ernst Krenek, introduced Humphries to the Weimar music and began his lifelong fascination with compositions the Nazis denounced as degenerate music.

In 1951, Humphries imported the first cast recording of *The Threepenny Opera* by Brecht and Weill, and in the late 1970s travelled to California to

meet Krenek, who had emigrated to the US following Hitler’s rise to power.

Humphries had persuaded the Sydney Opera House to let him direct an Australian premiere of *Jonny spielt auf* (Jonny strikes up), one of Krenek’s early operas, which starred a black jazz musician, was translated into 18 languages and successfully toured Europe in 1928.

“It sounded like Mahler played by Duke Ellington,” Humphries said.

Krenek readily endorsed the project and planned to fly to Sydney to collaborate in the production. The Sydney Opera House board, however, changed its mind, deciding to commission yet another production of *The Pirates of Penzance*.

Publicising his *Weimar Cabaret* show, Humphries described the Weimar period as “a brief burst of wonderful art and invention, and discovery and beauty, with the musical side of it suppressed almost immediately by the Nazis.” Its music, he insisted, should be revived and presented to contemporary audiences and celebrated.

Humphries was suspicious of identity politics, its self-righteous posturing and the associated “cancellation” techniques used against artists who failed to conform. “The New Puritanism has sometimes an uncomfortable resemblance with the old, and art still has its formidable adversaries,” he said.

Noting the rising tide of these unhealthy sentiments and their impact on artistic creativity, Humphries told the *Guardian* newspaper in 2018: “It’s so much easier to shock people these days. I find it extremely provocative and therefore inspiring to find myself in a society that is so prudish when it thinks it’s being liberal. It’s ridiculous.” The article was headlined, “I defend to the ultimate my right to give deep and profound offence.”

Almost one year later, in April 2019, the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, which Humphries and Peter Cook had established in 1987, stripped his name from its most prestigious award—“the Barry”—after he told a British newspaper that transgender was a “fashion.” Humphries, who insisted he had been misquoted, was, according to reports, deeply hurt by this miserable and ignorant decision.

Hannah Gadsby, who won the 2017 Barry award for her appalling and humourless *Nanette*, hailed the festival’s cancellation of the veteran comedian. Humphries, she tweeted, had “completely lost the ability to read the room.”

Gadsby’s flippant comment, which insists that artists must always be able to “read the room”—i.e., adjust their work to the prevailing cultural norms—is an unashamed admission of creative bankruptcy.

Humphries’ endeavours, and the work of all genuinely creative artists, are never based on “reading the room” but challenging audiences, and their political and cultural biases, and making them think. As this writer and the many others who attended a Barry Humphries’ show will testify, no one’s preconceptions were “safe” at his performances. This was the legacy and vital foundations of his seven decades of artistic work.



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