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FOR YOUR EDNA-FICATION

Dame Edna brings her brand of heavily sequined camp to the Orange County Performing Arts Center.

By STACY DAVIES SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

'Camp' is not just a place you send your children in the summertime. It's also an artistic realm where those who love drag, B-movies and saucy, silver-haired dames choose to live all year round. Camp icons Waylon Flowers and Madame, Bette Midler and Elvira traveled from the fringe to the mainstream, nestling themselves in the bosoms of many average Americans.

Aussie Dame Edna Everage has found her niche there as well. She's the creation of actor Barry Humphries, whom the Dame dismisses as "a sad little figure who's rich – thanks to me!"

Dame Edna, who answers questions about her age with "I'm as old as my tongue and slightly older than my teeth" has been playing the international laugh circuit since the late 1960s – but many in the United States who don't tune in to offbeat entertainment may have missed her.

That's perplexing, since Everage usually wears more glitter and sequins than all Palm Springs country club ladies combined. She had a much-loved TV talk show in the United States in 1991, "Dame Edna's Hollywood," and appeared on the final episodes of "Ally McBeal." Along with her current touring act, she recently appeared on "The Sharon Osbourne Show" – giving the hostess a handbag made from kangaroo scrotum, a move that left Osbourne and her audience speechless with belly laughs.

She's also done really bad films. Her first major stinker was 1978's "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" with fellow Australians the Bee Gees.

"That film sank without a trace!" she says, laughing, in her elegant, gravelly voice.

Then there was, "The Howling III: The Marsupials," where at least three werewolves dress up like nuns.

"Has that film ever been released? Wasn't Nicole (Kidman) in that?"

Sadly, she was not. The Dame went on to appear in other memorable titles such as "Pterodactyl Women From Beverly Hills" with Beverly D'Angelo and "Spice World" with the Spice Girls. All this deliciously bad cinema has firmly secured Dame Edna's place in the hearts of those who yearn for tasteless excess.

One should not confuse Dame Edna's film career with her stage work, however. A masterful mistress at spinning wild stories and yarns, Dame Edna tailors her shows to her audience – she cares about your happiness – right down to the show title.

"I'm very proud of the fact that I have a show that nice people can ask for at the box office without feeling embarrassed to have to whisper 'Urinetown' or 'Vagina Monologues.' "

She guarantees a hardy guffaw every half-minute but also adopts a maternal attitude, greeting her audience with her trademark "Hello, possums" – a moniker her own mother used for her children. She particularly loves appearing in California, reminding us that Australia and the Golden State share some historical heritage.

"Australia and California were once joined in Pangaea, you know. And fossils of the collagen, muffin-mouthed women of California have been found in caves in Australia. We're undeniably linked."

Everage's own history is a rags-to-riches tale of pure, unadulterated myth making, and by her own accounts, she's had her hands in every pop culture pie imaginable. As a housewife Down Under in the '70s, she claims, she started a little acting school in her kitchen called The Dead (Dame Edna's Academy of Drama) where the Kidmans, Crowes, Blanchetts, Gibsons and Jackmans brought their tots to learn a bit about acting at the hands of Oz's grand dame.

"Mr. and Mrs. Newton-John, were the first people to leave their daughter with me. I advised her never to sing in public. And then little Helen Reddy came along. You know, I recorded 'I Am Woman' before she did – mine is a bit more aggressive, however."

She also claims that former student Mel Gibson asked her to be in "The Passion of the Christ."

"Between you and me, that film would have been better if I had been in it. Mel approached me about being one of the Marys. And I think if I had been, what a different tone that film would have had. Perhaps fewer tears, perhaps more."

Sitting on top of the world didn't come easy for the Dame, who started out as a regular housewife, with three children and an ailing husband, trapped in '60s suburbia.

"I had been conditioned to believe by society that my biological cycle was over. I was living in a not very nice house, staring out the window at broken toys, wrist-deep in gray water, tears streaming down my cheeks."

Then the doorbell rang.

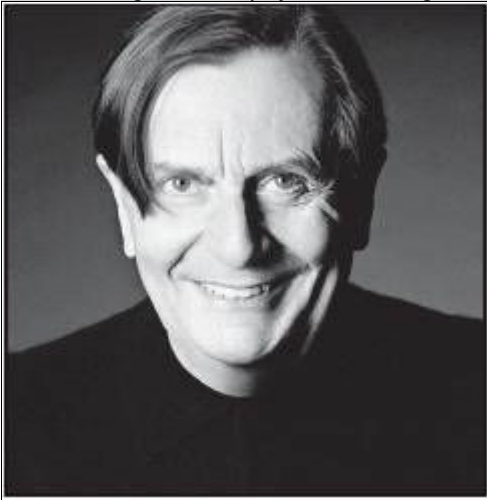
"Some of my girlfriends had sent a little snap of me in a bathing costume into the Australian Lovely Mother Contest – and I became a finalist! I took my trip to England, and the rest is history. And I learned a most important lesson that I'd like to impart to all women: Put your family last. They'll never thank you if you put them first, and it won't make any difference anyway."

The Dame is a giver, however, regardless of her familial flight. A very wealthy woman, she channels most of her earnings back into her favorite charities: the Friends of the Prostate and the Deviated Septum Society. She's even considering branching out to the O.C.

"Prostate World will be an adventure playground in the Costa Mesa area – and it's much needed."

So how does this Tony Award winner find the time to give so much?

"I ask, how do you not find the time? I give squillions to these charities and do these shows because I care. Many disturbed people come to see my show, and I give so much hope to them. I'm the new Deepak Chopra, really, but with much more singing and dancing – and a psychic reading or two."



BARRY HUMPHRIES: "A sad little figure who's rich – thanks to me," Dame Edna says of her 'creator.'

Dame Edna

- **Where:** Orange County Performing Arts Center, 600 Town Center Drive
- **When:** 8 p.m. today, Friday and Saturday; 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday
- **How much:** \$34.50 - \$64.50
- **Availability:** Good
- **Call:** (714) 740-7878
- **Online:** www.ticketmaster.com, www.oc-pac.org



PHOTOS: GREG GORMAN

DAME EDNA: A beauty contest and rejection of family responsibility helped make 'her' what she is today.