

the man behind the dame

Dame Edna Everage - gigastar and style icon - makes her Christmas panto debut at Wimbledon. Kiran Sidhu meets Edna's mentor **Barry Humphries**

Dame Edna Everage will be starring as the Saviour of London in the Wimbledon panto, *Dick Whittington*, this December. Amazingly, this will be her panto debut. Incredible because, just as it is fitting for Aphrodite to emerge from foam and rock in beautiful Cyprus, it is only right that the flamboyant Edna should flourish in the boo and the hiss of panto.

I stare in awe at Edna during her photo shoot for Wimbledon Theatre. Bedecked in full pink sequined regalia and extravagant make-up, she climbs aboard the London Eye, the mistress of all she surveys. Edna tells her public: 'The thought of guiding Dick Whittington to become Lord Mayor of London thrills me. I did the exact same thing for Boris Johnson not long ago.'

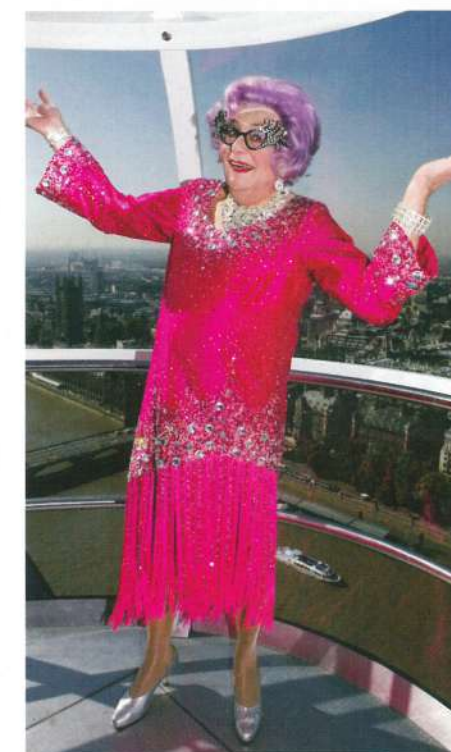
She pops back to the Marriot Hotel in County Hall - where she startled a couple of unsuspecting guests - to change. And it is here, only 20 minutes later in the quiet of the library, that I meet Barry Humphries, her friend and mentor, the man behind the Dame. Barry is wearing a wry smile, pink trousers, a purple jacket and a tilted Panama hat; he looks - to my adoring eyes - every inch the legend.

As soon as he knows I'm from Wimbledon *Time & Leisure*, he chuckles. Still retaining some of that lovely Australian timbre, Barry says: 'Wimbledon reminds me of where I grew up in Melbourne - leafy streets, nice detached houses and respectable.'

Barry tells me that his first big gig was in *Oliver!* in 1960, in Hammersmith. The show transferred to Wimbledon Theatre as it was felt it would never be big enough for the West End. 'Since then, it has become one of the most successful musicals, and I was a part of it right from the start, at the very theatre I am now playing panto at.' He is palpably proud of completing this circle in his life.

Humphries has penned several autobiographies and I wonder how easy or difficult they have been to write. As the man behind the lovely Dame Edna and the less lovely Sir Les Patterson was it easy to step forward as

himself? 'People's lives, especially one's own, are always full of drama, humour and disaster. I had to be pretty frank when writing my autobiography without being boring. I had to really re-live my life.' Humphries has battled with alcohol and has been married a fair few times - four in fact - so reliving some of the past couldn't have been pleasant? 'Most of it was - even the unpleasant things - because they enabled me to reflect that they didn't last forever. They came and then they went.'




Humphries is a wonderful story teller. His lucid narrator's voice and soothing, whimsical air made me wish he would read me a bedtime story. I decide that it's best not to ask him.

What's particularly endearing is how he talks about his characters with a real detachment, as though he's a child believing in his own imaginary friend. 'Edna is thinking that playing in this panto is going to lead to some big Hollywood role.' And what of Les? 'It's extraordinary the number of women who like Les. He needs Liz Hurley to groom him, like she did to Shane Warne.' But why *wouldn't* he believe in his own characters? Everybody else does: stars like Charlton Heston and Joan Collins happily lap up Edna's put-downs as though they were blessings from the Pope.

On *Desert Island Discs* in 2009, Humphries said he 'craved dullness'. I find this rather odd. Humphries is a creative force and a true polymath - a landscape painter, a writer and a musician; a man of letters, intellect and literary wisdom (he owns 30,000 books). Talking to him, I start to think of him as a real-life Willy Wonka - flamboyant and a lover of life. Surely such a positive life force craving dullness is a bit like craving death, I suggest. He laughs, 'Not at all! I just don't like being too caffeinated. Everything excites me, stimulates me and amuses me. I just like to settle down and be dull for a while.'

I have tapped into the quiet side of Barry Humphries. This shroud of dullness is his chosen cloak for his colourful mind. I believe too his flamboyant characters Edna and Les Patterson have their own level of melancholy: Edna, with all her fabulousness has no self-awareness. And Les is the ultimate buffoon at whom everyone laughs. I ask him whether they are revealing a sadness that is all his own. 'There's a slight melancholy edge to most comics,' he almost agrees. 'I'm not saying we have broken hearts or lives, we're just ordinary people. But you notice it more if someone's in the public eye, making people laugh. You notice if something sad happens in their lives. There's a whiff of sadness, a spice in the dish.'

I ask him whether he still enjoys his work; he says: 'I am lucky to have found an industry that doesn't take much effort at all.' In a few days Humphries flies out to New Zealand where he's filming *The Hobbit*. 'I'm looking forward to the plane journey - uneventful, I hope. The flight is about seven Nicholas Cage movies long - films that no one wants to see!'

Sounds like the perfect flight for Barry - uneventful and dull. But come back soon, Barry - Dame Edna's adoring public awaits her in Wimbledon! 

Dame Edna Everage stars in *Dick Whittington* at New Wimbledon Theatre from 9 December 2011-15 January 2012 (two shows a day); box office: 020 8545 7900 www.atgtickets.com/wimbledon

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