

Barry Humphries: Misunderstood Anarchist of Culture

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He was always a step ahead, his mind geared not only for the next move, but the next sequence. He also smelt it, anticipated the audience reaction, shaped the prejudice in context for consumption. He created an antipodean version of dada art. He confused, baffled and enraged audiences with his polymathic, panoramic reach.

The genius of the late **Barry Humphries** first took root in Britain, along with a flowing of other Australian expatriates who had made Blighty their home. It became evident in Britain's most famous, remorseless panner of reputation and issue, the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, that weedkiller of inflated reputations. There, another genius of comedy, Peter Cook, understood a kindred spirit. At Cook's suggestion, Humphries ran a comic strip that made him famous and eventually found celluloid expression: [The Adventures of Barry McKenzie](#).

The reception of the comic strip in Australia, with its slang-fluent, rough protagonist stomping through the Mother Country, was a foretaste of things to come. Compiled in three book collections, the first two were banned by the Customs Department under the Customs Prohibited Import Regulations. The silly justification was section 4A, which prohibited the importation of works and articles deemed blasphemous, indecent, or obscene, or unduly emphasising matters of sex, horror, violence or crime, or are likely to encourage depravity.

The harebrained nature of this measure, one that could only have been appreciated by

Humphries, was that selections from *Private Eye*, including “Barry McKenzie’s Naughty Night”, were already available in the country in the 1965 publication *Penguin Private Eye*.

Her Dame Edna Everage (Mrs Norm Everage to some) act, hewn from the dull, insular terrain of Moonee Ponds in Victoria, was always going to be an uneven sell for home audiences. In the sex-suppressed Anglosphere, with its hypocrisies of gender, control and concealment, it was brilliant, a poking, full frontal display of the bigoted housewife giving bigotry a lengthy outing.

The bricks of the mythmakers are now being assembled, an effort to build a mausoleum of deception. Always be suspicious of the “he was much loved by all” tag; they usually have a fair share of aggrieved, envious enemies.

There are, however, clues in the coverage. Humphries was a “comedy export” – read, not palatable in straitlaced, monochrome Australia, a bit too salty, or gamey, for local consumption. He tested his various alter-egos – the barely tolerable Edna, the monstrous, dribbling Sir Les Patterson and so forth – on foreign soil. (Rarely mentioned in tributes is his more complex, rounded character, Sandy Stone.) Contrary to the hagiographically saccharine accounts now clogging news outlets and tributes, Australians did not like what they saw of themselves. The BH treatment was harsh, unsparing, and relentlessly Juvenalian.

With ever increasing notoriety, he would become the target of stock standard accusations. He was unfair to women. He toyed with race. He was insensitive and lacked empathy. None of these viewpoints appreciated Kurt Tucholsky’s [observation](#) made in 1919 that satire, in its essence, is unfair: “the just,” goes the Biblical expression, “suffer with the unjust.”

In November 1978, the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal criticised Humphries for his “put down of middle-aged women” (*Canberra Times*, Nov 3, 1978). One irony-free Tina Namow of the Women’s Studies Collective at Flinders University was a case in point, spending time combing through commercials with alleged sexist import. She was delighted to stumble across Dame Edna’s portrayal of women in the Whirlpool advertisements, duly charging the effort as “incompetent”. “To add to the insult, he then makes racist statements such as ‘grubby little foreigner’ during the commercial.”

In 1994, he was criticised by Canberra academic Bill Mandle for being at it again. Dame Edna had become an international figure, no longer a suburban dweller of Moonee Ponds. No distinction is drawn between the artist performer from the individual off the stage and out of the persona. The representation is the artist. “Humphries is relentlessly consistent in his hatreds: women free is a caricature, is a threat. Women must be domesticated and sexually submissive.” This careless misreading is done from the wrong end of the comic impression; it is precisely that received image of woman Dame Edna is mocking, that they, in that macho Australian world, could not be truly free.

In the United States, a country known for small pockets of irony rather than lashings of it, Humphries also found himself in hot water, though it hardly seemed to scald him. The February 2003 issue of *Vanity Fair* caused much rage. It featured Dame Edna’s views in a satirical column about a reader’s concern about the pressures of learning Spanish. “Who speaks it that you are really desperate to talk? The help? Your leaf blower?” Again, we see rigid hypocrisy exposed in the outrage. To satirise society’s divides, the exploitation, and

the manipulation, is to invite trouble.

The whole episode certainly puzzled, and depressed, the Pulitzer Prize winner Liz Balmaseda, writing in *Hispanic* (Mar 2003). “Let’s get this straight (trying to be funny Liz?): It takes one loopy character in ill-fitting garb to rally us into militancy?” Well, yes. She goes on to write in blessed tones about the constructive role played by the Australian performer. “In a way, I’d say God bless Dame Edna. In one swoop, she exposed the worst of the ‘mainstream’ media AND the misguided militancy of its targets.”

For all his exploits, Humphries was also considered too much for the organisers of the Melbourne International Comedy Festival in 2019. (As a measure of cravenness, the organisers have refused to officially mark the passing of a figure that singularly did so much to establish and sustain the event.) The festival’s most prestigious offering, since 2000 named the Barry Award, was scrubbed of the illustrious name. It became, instead, the far more anodyne Melbourne International Comedy Festival Award.

The reason? Remarks made about the transgender movement. “How many different kinds of lavatory can you have?” Humphries [rhetorically asked](#) *The Spectator* in a 2018 interview. “And it’s pretty evil when it’s preached to children by crazy teachers.”

Having stated that transgenderism was “a fashion”, his detractors proceeded to accuse him of not going along with it. That Australian comedian of sorts, Hannah Gadsby, who won the Barry Award in 2017, [suggested](#) he loved “those who hold power, hates vulnerable minorities and has completely lost the ability to read the room. That’s not a comedian, that’s an irrelevant, inhumane dick biscuit of the highest order.”

Thankfully, the persistently courageous Miriam Margolyes [took issue](#) with the Festival organisers’ decision to cancel the protean dick biscuit, accurately pointing out that he was not “properly appreciated by Australia”, let alone the crony-cringing set at the MICF. “He’d had more talent in his little finger than they did in their whole bodies, all of them.”

The [weak response](#) from festival director, Susan Provan, was a model answer from managerial followers of the cancel-culture credo. “Some years ago, the award for most outstanding show was re-named to reinforce the equality and diversity that our Festival community has always championed.” The prerogative of the inclusive is always to exclude.

Ironically enough, the various characters of Humphries are meant to read the room in precisely the way that Gadsby misunderstands. It was a reading that came with an acid bath, the just having to suffer with the unjust. It should never be forgotten that Humphries, in departing, left the landscape a glorious, often misunderstood anarchist of culture.

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