

An extraordinary life



IT was an auspicious day on 6 August 1926 in Kent, England, when Edna Frances Clarke joined the fold. By age three, it was clear she had weak ankles so her aunt suggested enrolling her in dance classes. Edna's life-long love of singing, dancing and acting resulted. Although dancing strengthened her legs, she was never able to play active sport.

Keen to assist children, when schools closed during World War II, 14-year-old Edna, who had been dux of her school, started a school for neighbourhood children in her parents' attic. A year later, 17-year-old Bill Jones first saw her in the local park; he later wrote that he knew that this was the girl he would marry. Daughter Vivien: "Dad adored her from that moment until his untimely death at 56 years."

Their first child, Martin, was born in a London Hospital in June 1944 when the first of thousands of doodlebugs (bombs with wings) landed on London. The new young mothers were handed their babies each evening and the nursing staff went home!

In 1958, Bill, Edna, Martin, Vivien and Trevor emigrated to Australia. Seeking immediate community involvement, they joined an entertainment group called the Modernaires and travelled around Victoria presenting musical shows at aged care facilities and hospitals.

I spoke with the effervescent Edna in February this year at a Peridot dress rehearsal where she was accompanied by enthusiastic residents of her senior citizens' village. Meeting Edna was a true 'experience' – 90 years of age, slim and spry body, topped by bright red hair to match her bubbly personality.

In the 1960s, Edna enrolled at Swinburne Technical College – a lifetime of producing, directing, set design, stage management, adjudication, dramaturgy and a children's theatre workshop were the result. Edna said that students were not only taught acting but about makeup, sound and lighting. "You've got to know how to put the lights in the right place to get the effect you want. We had to learn everything – not just being on stage." *(continued on page 35)*



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Around the same time, she studied at Ingmar Bergman's Melbourne's School of Film. Edna and Bill produced environmental documentaries and Vivien recalls: "They also filmed a TV series – the video equipment was so heavy they were often up to their knees in mud and being chased by trains on bridges when they had been told trains didn't run on Sundays!"

Although Edna trained at Kenwood Theatre where many actors went on to TV shows such as Cop Shop and Number 96, she wouldn't give up full-time employment to pursue that possibility, instead continuing in community theatre in plays and musicals and she was involved in establishing and running of Melbourne's first 'accredited' hospitality training programs and ran a licensed motel/restaurant in the 'seventies.

Following the death of her beloved Bill in 1980, Edna worked in youth theatre and also coordinated an after-school program where she taught boys to knit and girls to be more assertive! Back to her thespian pursuits: at the 1983 Waverley Festival of Theatre, Edna won Best Production, Best Set Design and Best Actress award!

Although her ambition to enter the 1986 Moomba Festival was thwarted by local groups, at an after-show cast party the woman running the Moomba Festival, having just seen her work, suggested Edna join the festival! "You will only have to do two plays that we'll come and see, and we'll invite you into it."

The outcome was that she and future husband Gordon Bartlett started their own theatre company – Peridot (named for her August birthstone). With no time for auditions, she asked friends to join the cast of *Moving*. They had no flats or props and thankfully the (now defunct) Box Hill City Theatre Company loaned them a set.

Edna's Moomba entry, *The Dresser* (its first non-professional production) resulted in Best Production, Best Director and Best Set Design – bear in mind that Edna was now nearly 60.

Over the years Edna worked with schools, casting and directing school musicals at Primary and Secondary level and, having had no previous background in films or theatre, Gordon assisted Edna in producing educational videos for schools and the Victorian indigenous pre-school community.

Playwrights were still seeking Edna's assistance earlier this year – until Vivien told her that she must tell people her age – no one could guess – because she thought she could still do anything.

"As kids we laughed because Mum couldn't run", recalls Vivien. "However, x-rays revealed, when she was in her 70s and had resorted to directing plays on her knees, that she had been born with deformed ankles. The specialist surgeons couldn't believe that she had walked at all. Her ankle bones were fused to relieve some pain but she refused to use a stick!"

Vivien says that Edna was also a superb seamstress and made fine tapestries and cross-stitch work (see right) – her unfinished work will be completed by family members. Vivien: "Mum had a finger in every pie but everything she did she did extremely well. Right to the last Mum just wanted to help people and make them good at what they do."

Edna was fortunate to have husbands very willing to, as

Vivien put it, 'follow her dream'. When she and Gordon moved to a retirement village in their eighties, they soon had other villagers embroiled in play readings – what every retirement village needs is an Edna!

Following a life of constant pain, Edna passed away from cancer on 15 September, shortly after celebrating her 90th birthday. She is survived by her husband, Gordon, aged 95; two of three children, five of seven grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

Peridot's next production, Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*, is a fast-paced whodunit. Venue: Unicorn Theatre, Mt Waverley Secondary College, Lechte Road, Mt Waverley (2–18 February 2017).

RAINE BIANCALTI



PICTURES: (Top) Filming with Gordon in the 1980s; (Middle) Edna in Directing mode; (Below) Another of Edna's many talents

