

JUST FAMOUS ENOUGH NOT TO BE NOTICED

As told by
Michael Donovan

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2.

1968 - 1975 Cinema | Opera | Returning to School | Teaching

If at first you don't succeed try management.

Conveniently my new flat was two suburban blocks away from the Red Hill Catholic Church which I have mentioned before. Vince arrived to collect me for church. I sat him down and apologised for the way I left. His hurt was still visible but this terrific guy told me to be true to myself at all times. That was to be prophetic less than two hours later.

The sermon in any church service is a hard performance for the priest both wanting to get a pastoral message across and holding audience attention. I know this because as part of Franquin's audience I'd struggle to stay awake having seen and heard the performance so many times before 'volunteering' to go on stage. Being more than mildly disinterested in any sermon makes one's attention deficit even more likely. So it was with me that morning as I drifted into light sleep as the priest's voice droned on.

In the theatre there's the sounds of the audience applauding and shuffling as interval commences to break the torpor. Something akin happens at the close of the sermon, bums shuffle to regain circulation and murmurings are permissible as the priest journeys back to the altar from the pulpit.

Programmed to react without actually thinking, I broke into applause at the end of the sermon with the good father half way down the pulpit steps. "Oh! Shit", I exclaimed. "I thought I was in the theatre." After service, Vince and I returned to my flat and had a very long, honest and overdue talk. He never asked me to go to Mass again.

I went through a phase of agnosticism emerging atheist. This backing away from religion started when I was about 14. Catholicism, the imposed religion of my parents, was simply not credible. I have never seriously looked for a substitute. Later in life, I was to read the Christian Bible again. This time both Old and the New Testaments as well as some informed texts interpreting their efficacy as credible. My earlier conviction, made as a young teenager, held fast and was even strengthened.

One interest my dad and I shared was photography. On one of his regular Sunday post-mass visits I showed him a Polaroid SX70 camera I had purchased. This camera folded up to a flat box of brushed metal and pig-skin. Its new image technology produced self-developing hard photos in three minutes. A wonder of the pre-digital age. Vince got a bit teary and I asked why.

Here I was with one of the most advanced cameras of the day. It turns out my father had been the proud owner of one of the first Kodak Brownie cameras of his generation. He then said, "Imagine what your children will hand to you one day?" Of course he was right, we now have digital, but where to next?

It was the fashion around this time for men to let one's sideburns grow into *mutton chops*. I joined in but didn't like the look so I grew a full face beard. The cut and length might have varied over the years but I have never been without a beard since.

My Wife Carol has never seen me clean-shaven except as I write it is now grey and so short it is almost invisible.

Theatre merged into film when I met and worked for George Anastas the General Manager of the Albert St, Brisbane MGM Cinema. I applied for and got the job of assistant to George. My banking background was ideal as it enabled me to handle the accounting for concession bar receipts, admission ticketing reconciliation and payroll. I found I was very at-home with people in public environments such as cinema audiences; also easily managing crowd control being tall and having a clear voice.

Franquin gave me a terrific reference for this job application describing me as honest, reliable and personable. George was impressed.

My biggest expense was the purchase of a dinner suit, dress shirts and bow ties. Back then the managers dressed formally for every evening show after 5pm. I was part of a penguin parade as each manager did the rounds of competitor's cinemas. For me it started with Ted D'Arcy in the Hoyts Paris across the street and then around the corner in Queen St., well before the Brisbane Queen Street Mall was built, where John Scott ran Hoyts from the wonderfully ornate Regent Theatre. Onwards next to the Odeon and then Her Majesty's Theatre this was still 'live or legitimate' under Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust management.

Being part of the glamour night-life of this entertainment precinct we all became good friends. During every evening we'd look in on each other to discuss trade, quality or otherwise of the current show and staffing. This connectivity was to see me move to Hoyts from MGM, within a year. It was not uncommon for junior management to also usher when the sessions were busy. When ushering one's left and right is in reverse to that of the patron. To this day, I regularly confuse my left and right much to my wife's annoyance when touring by car.

MGM was the Walt Disney distributor for Australia. School Holidays and Disney were big business. Their shows guaranteed many an airing for the *Full House* sign. I learned it is technically

possible to sell 90 seats over the house capacity of 1411 when you have kids in the audience. Between their walking around, going for drinks and lollies, visiting the loo, sitting on Mum's lap or laying in the aisles, you can always fit in some extras and never look in breach of the regulations. George didn't like over-selling as the money had to tally with the ticket numbers and session sequence. I, on the other hand, understood unders and overs across sessions and moved the reports from session-tally to day-tally to account for the anomaly. Head Office was impressed with our trade numbers and credited my PR efforts.

George came in one day during the holidays and was very agitated. *Disney on Parade* was in town playing as a big-top show. Later that day, the lead characters were to be at the cinema to promote a Disney feature film *Winnie-the-Pooh* running concurrently with the live show. It was a great cross-over opportunity for a promotional gig with kids and the media. The actor playing Pooh Bear was ill. Actor's Equity required only a paid up member could perform. I weaselled my way into the role for the day based on my Franquin experience and using a New Zealand accent saying my Equity card was at home in Auckland.

I have now lost the excellent photo of me in the costume performing with other characters for the media. If you were to be looking at it then you would see, behind the word *Hunny* running across the pot with the rotating bee on top, my face and head inside. The costume stank of sweat, was frightfully hot but the event went off really well. Equity never did follow-up on my membership proof.

I did many PR stints to promo films at the MGM cinema including dressing as a vampire for midnight screenings of Roman Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers or Pardon me but your teeth are in my neck*. Little did I know may years later I would have direct dealings with Polanski on two levels.

This promotional effort brought me to the notice of Ted D'Arcy, the cinema General Manager, immediately across Albert St at the Paris Cinema who in turn recommended me to

John Scott the State Manager of Hoyts Theatres. Hoyts had an executive trainee programme and I was asked to join. I worked under Scott at the Regent Theatre. The Regent, like most other cinemas around, was actually a converted live theatre. I recommend research into the history of this wonderful building which still stands. Its decor and fittings from a bye-gone era are truly gorgeous.

Between Anastas and Scott, along with D'Arcy, I learned the cinema management trade well. A big part was staff relations. Back then modern thinking around personal relations with staff were much looser than today. My Red Hill flat was busy.

At 21, I had inherited some shares. I now sold them to buy a car. Terry did a deal for me on a Humber Vogue through a mate. Old fashioned, slow and safe. Vince approved. The freedom was wonderful. Vince had given me the basics of driver training in the Riley, followed by lessons in the family's Holden. I had supplemented his instruction with professional help to get my driver's licence shortly before my 21st birthday.

The Humber lasted only three months when its ball-joints gave out after a trip to the Darling Downs on a weekend away with three usherettes. Vince insisted Terry's mate make good with a replacement. So, for a few hundred dollars in addition to the defective trade-in at full price, I received a Triumph 2000 Mk II with some engine modifications. The engine required a 1:10 boost of octane just to idle properly. I loved it. So did the usherettes.

On 20 July 1969, I sourced a TV at the theatre and set it up in the foyer. We had all manner of problems with reception but eventually achieved a passable picture. The Moon Landing was about to happen. I thought it important customers and staff had an opportunity to see it. Scott thought otherwise and ordered the TV removed. He insisted the TV be disconnected despite my ardent push back as to the unique historic significance of the moment and Australia's role in relaying the first broadcast images from space to the world out of Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station near Canberra.

Scott left the theatre for a meeting close by. I reconnected the set and turned it on. I called the staff together plus any customers queuing for a session to commence. All were invited to watch history unfold. Word reached some in the film audience and they too joined the growing group. Even the projectionists came down from their booth. People streamed in from Queen Street.

As numbers grew, the grand staircase started to fill even though it was a less than clear picture on the TV from more than a few metres away. The cheers and roar from everyone when Neil Armstrong took that step and said those words was amazing. Ted D'Arcy had come from his Paris Theatre around the corner when the word had spread through the staff between the cinemas. He saved my job.

Scott returned to find excited people filling the foyer, the TV commentary running and his instructions disobeyed. I was carpeted and except for Ted's intervention I would have been fired. Scott was a great film man but had no sense of 'the moment'. I was sent to Coventry of sorts by having to manage the Capalaba Drive-in Theatre.

Now in those days Capalaba was way out on the familiar road to Redland Bay and Cleveland. I motored daily in the Triumph not always from my flat but from someone else's. The inconsideration of some dickhead teens for leaving the drive-in without their date of the night resulted in me scoring occasionally with young ladies left stranded and needing a ride home. I was a very obliging drive-in manager.

Apart from what some may think as a boring job, managing a drive-in is fraught with unexpected drama. Along with deserted love interests, there is all manner of amorousness to watch in cars. Winter does pose a fogged glass impediment but the motion of the vehicle gives one the point of focus. Then there were inattentive patrons who would drive away without removing speakers from car windows, not surprisingly losing the glass or in rare instances the complete door.

One notable incident illustrates the range of services the drive-in manager has to accommodate. A huge man-mountain arrived at the office late in the movie. Stoned and in pain he asked for an ambulance and opened his hand to reveal his big toe resting in a pool of blood. Drunk, he had parted from his *hallux* when he argued with his girl and exited the car to kick the speaker pole in frustration. He was taken away. His car was locked and left for collection. I drove his girl home. She was very appreciative. Make of that comment what you want.

I redeemed myself to Scott and Hoyts by planning and staging the Australian premiere of the Academy Award winning movie 'Charly' starring Cliff Robertson, at the Paris Theatre. Robertson won the Best Actor Oscar for his performance based on the Daniel Keyes novel *Flowers for Algernon*. I have the only autograph Robertson gave, along with one of the best photographs of my parents standing in evening dress at the top of the Paris grand staircase as the crowds went in to view the film.

There is no doubt about it Moya and Vince did cut a sight. Elegant and poised they apparently were a number at Brisbane's aforementioned famous *Cloudland* in the heyday of that ballroom during the war years. As MC for the evening I naturally had them in the best seats next to Robertson, the Scotts and the D'Arcys. The party after was a real society event and was well covered by the papers in which Moya and Vince featured. Moya never made a comment about the evening or gave me a thank you for the invite. Not a word passed between us even after my making many introductions at the post-screening party.

Narelle Davidson was a Regent Theatre usherette who was studying singing. We had a few dates. She appears to have done well in her professional opera career as a soprano singing with some of the leading opera companies and in productions with legends like Sutherland, Elms and Elkins.

I kept in contact with Gary Campbell. He did well in the music scene and through his club work where he worked with Bernard King. Bernard did a clever comedy drag show and was known for

his quick-wit, repartee, fab parties and excellent food. This was well before Bernard became a national celebrity cook. It was the start of his game show and review period. His Spring Hill home, where he lived with his indigenous partner Allan Marshall was a botanical wonderland, an interest he carried to all his homes such as Balmain in Sydney where he held an extravagant birthday party for Sue Freebury.

While a very talented self taught amateur cook, Bernard wasn't originally adept at preparing cuts of meat from bulk, filleting fish or dissecting fowl, preferring to have it done by the butcher. I recall many a Sunday morning spent doing the butchering for his great Sunday afternoon soirees. Years later, he graciously thanked me for this training, especially how to deal with crabs and other crustacean. Unbeknown to me this was to be a stepping stone for my start in food. Also, these parties were where I learned to drink.

At the back of the Regent Theatre building in Ann St was a hole-in-the-wall watch repair shop. I acknowledged the guy every day but never got to know him. A week before I was to be transferred interstate he approached me to get him out of a financial bind. I took a title deed for a block of land on Russell Island in Moreton Bay as security for a \$200 loan. The shop was shut next day. He had vanished never to return.

Russell Island became renowned for land scams where most blocks were submerged during high tide. I became the proud owner of a dry block with a crumbling well which had a family of snakes in it. Some 20 years later the Council compulsorily repossessed all freehold land on the island and I made money, never having paid rates.

My first mentor was Ted D'Arcy who was recognised for his advice, experience and the respect in which he was held by the industry. I appreciated in the way he guided me. An opportunity arose to move to Western Australia and expand my knowledge of the cinema distribution and promotional trade within the large Hoyts network plus work with another State Manager in Perth on the creation of a new cinema complex.

Ted prepared me for the likely challenges ahead, initially the move away from my city of birth. Back then, the difference in cultures between east and west coasts was considerable. I called home and spoke to Vince about the move. Congratulations came first then sorrow at a move which would likely make strained communication even harder. I planned the transfer with Scott's office and the Perth office. I arranged to have the contents of my small flat shipped by road not realising I could have just bought new furniture and household goods in Perth for about the same cost. What one learns with time!

I decided to drive. I had no concept of the distance but the pull to just do it was irresistible and so I hit the road. The several hours spent in the offices of the Royal Automotive Club of Queensland to plan the trip were invaluable. But nothing prepares a city boy for the long distance between country towns, even longer stretches of road and the Nullarbor Plain. As for the scenery (including the monotonous flatness of the Nullarbor) it is majestic, wonderful yet frightening. Drivers pulled over to the side of the road, so I joined them for a chat, a cuppa and, of course, company. I found the Nullarbor experience to be a lonely drive. I learned to exchange information, plan ahead to anticipate fuel stops, expect the unexpected and to carry more water than originally allocated for the trip. Although dangerous I had to carry octane in jerry-cans in the car as there wasn't a dependable supply en route.

The Triumph performed well. I drove fast but carefully. Curiously, many years later I lost interest in driving. A car became a thing to get from point A to B. I think I drove up and down the east coast highways so frequently it became boring.

When Vince and Terry found out I had driven without telling them I think they were both proud of me and angry at the same time. The soft son perhaps wasn't so fragile after all. Two things I did in Perth during the next year were to complete both a defensive driving course and a remote areas driving course. Years later, both were to serve me well driving in country New South Wales with the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service. Additionally, I have

never had a serious accident and I put that down to initial good instruction from Vince and those courses.

To set-up home in Perth I needed some extra cash for a bond, car service and supplies. I called Vince and asked for \$700 which in my mind was a loan. Some months later, when I repaid it, he got very upset especially as I included interest. To him it was a commitment freely and willingly given. This was a wonderful but hard learned insight into just how supportive Vince wanted to be to me. And, from my perspective, I was making my own way in life and needed to feel completely independent.

The role in Perth was to supervise the demolition of the old Ambassador Theatre in readiness for WA's first multiplex while also managing other theatres and drive-ins. Ultimately I was not to be in Perth for the project completion. Work-wise, 1970, was pretty uneventful apart from learning a lot about demolition, the value of recovered copper wire and on-site theft.

The WA state manager was Max Reddin an industry legend and nice bloke. Like D'Arcy he mentored and assisted this young pup to develop. Max had been in the industry all his life, was enormously respected and a great teacher.

I shared a house bordering the Royal Perth Golf Course with two other guys, John and James and respective occasional girlfriends. John had a golf club membership so it was our habit to play a round on a Sunday afternoon after a good lunch and much drink.

The film industry employees club in Perth was called the *Reeler's Club*. Of significance to the story is the annual golf and fishing days especially as, on the golf day, I won the Don Bradman Cricket trophy for golf playing 18 holes for 180 strokes. I had played all holes using an umbrella. The curious thing about this was every time my ball got onto the green I took one putt to sink the ball. I still have the trophy. I have never played golf since.

My experience at the *Reeler's* fishing day was not so glorious. Rising at 4am, I ate a hearty breakfast in the belief a full stomach would ward off seasickness. Boy was I wrong. When

the burly bucket was uncorked, the smell of rotten crayfish carcasses sent me projectile vomiting over the edge of the boat contributing to the burly mix. The seas calmed and my seasickness started to pass. I began to fish and to my credit got the biggest snapper of the day. For months afterwards every time the club met, much to my embarrassment, they told the story of me being sick.

Until then, at no time had I ever concerned myself with whether I was bright or not. That changed when I wanted to date an usherette named Janine. Red haired and a stunner, she resisted my advances until I submitted to her psychologist father's rule whereby she could only date guys he had vetted with an IQ test. I undertook the test with Janine's encouragement and naturally enquired about my level. Her father's response was I could date his daughter. I pressed for an IQ number from him, only to be told, "Not to worry."

I was tested again some years later on instruction from the new CEO of Hoyts, John Mostyn. I had no result from either test as to an actual IQ number. These events made me think about going back to further my education. Learning and improving became life-long commitments.

Apparently, I did a good job for the year in Perth so much so I was transferred to head office at 600 George Street, Sydney. This time I did not drive. The Triumph was shipped at company cost by rail and delivered with a bent drive shaft which seems to have happened during the handling process. Over 30 kph the car shook and became unstable. The insurer claimed it was in that condition prior to freighting. Luckily I had been pulled over for speeding to my farewell party on Scarborough Beach. The cop let me off as I still had my Queensland licence on me and my home State road rules required overhead lighting to define a speed restricted area. I had invited him to the party which he attended as his shift was ending. His backup statement about the car condition got me an insurance settlement. I purchased a Mini Minor and loved it.

There were five of us in the head office segment of the young executive trainee program, me, Phil Franet, James Mitchell, Garry O'Connor and Wayne Maddern (*see dinner photo of the group of Hoyts executives*). Phil has had success in Melbourne's taxi industry running Silver Top Cabs, James a GM at Beyond International, Garry served for many years with Hoyts, Wayne ran the Confederation of Professional Performing Arts for a time also the Australia Live Theatre Council then apparently moved with his life-partner to the Philippines to breed Dalmatian dogs.

The trainee programme gave each of us a time in key departments, working towards secondment to a serving departmental director and to provide a potential succession line of talent. In its day an insightful and forward thinking plan. Hoyts CEO, Dale Turnbull was the sponsor. I had met him by handshake once previously in Brisbane on a business visit. He struck me as patrician in the full meaning of the word. Little did I know then I was to become one of his personal assistants.

My first assignment for six months was to the finance department under Royce Crittle and Fred McKay who was Director of Finance. Royce's assistant Morrie Conway didn't like the new guy and it took me weeks to bridge the gap and show I was not a challenger - just passing through. Royce was a chronic asthmatic on daily cortisone; florid face, wheezing but jovial. One of my roles was to prepare a very complicated financial report card for distributors in the USA. While everyone else regarded it as complicated, I relished the challenge.

Mastering the report along with a love of cooking, which also appealed greatly to Royce, broke down the barriers. Within several weeks I formed good working relationships with most department heads except for the head of human resources, Allan Lewis. Allan didn't like the trainee programme as he neither owned it nor had a say in it because it was run by CEO Dale and endorsed by the Hoyts board. A natural cynic with a lack of humour, Alan could easily suck the joy out of life. I learned he initially considered me "not serious enough" to be considered for higher office.

But, some years hence, he welcomed my return to the company after my stint at the Australian Opera.

I spent the following six months in advertising with Geoff Swinson and Greg Coote who went on to fame and fortune with Village Roadshow also Birch Carroll and Coyle. My MGM PR and earlier Hoyts advertising experience in Brisbane stood me in good stead here amongst some very competitive people. I learned heaps from every one of these great people at Hoyts. For me, the executive development programme was great grounding in corporate governance, company law, negotiation and deal-making, contracts, finance, human resources, PR, marketing and advertising.

The following six months were spent with Peter Marrett in film purchasing and distribution. He went on to join the opposition Greater Union when John Mostyn took over as Hoyts CEO in 1975. Peter and Garry O'Conner reported to Ted Harvey, Director - Theatre Department, a hard cigar smoking drinker with a Churchillian growl and approach. Once you broke through and established rapport under this grouchy exterior was a very good natured gentleman. During my time reporting to Ted and combining the time spent within Turnbull's office, I averaged over 300 film screenings annually.

I was promoted to run the Theatre Department in Sydney. State Managers did this outside of head office. Part of my role was to spot-check screening quality – picture, sound and changeover between reels of film for continuity. The brief also extended to staffing, theatre cleanliness, repair and maintenance, concessionaire operation and so on. I would irregularly 'walk' the city circuit, drive the suburbs and visit regional houses.

An upshot of this exposure was recognition by managers and some staff. After I'd visited a cinema they would call ahead and alert the others an inspection was underway. I had a habit of sitting in various parts of the auditorium to check sound, air and focus from a patron's perspective. This also allowed me to randomly test seats, check under seat floor cleanliness, carpet condition and more.

One particular day I sat in the upstairs 'family circle' area. I was joined at shift change by a very forward usherette. We chatted and agreed to meet for a drink at the weekend. Let's call her Tracy. We had a two week torrid affair. So what? Well, Tracy had a female partner from whom she took occasional breaks to, shall we say, jump the fence. These mainly weekend trysts ran for some eighteen months.

Years on, with Carol (my wife) we met Tracy in George Street, Sydney. I introduced them. We exchanged friendly greetings and moved on. I hope Tracy is well and happy.

The Lyceum Theatre was originally constructed as a hall in which was screened the first Lumiere brothers production film in Sydney in 1896. It became a Hoyts asset in 1918 when it was reconstructed and screened the first talkie films. Its beautiful art deco style was a refit in 1941. Many of the Hoyts cinemas were first class examples of art deco design. My old 'house' in Brisbane, the Regent, with its majestic staircase, extravagant scrolling and mirrors, is one of the last remaining. Another is the restored State Theatre in Sydney.

Garry O'Connor resisted moving on to his next post in the executive program. He had successfully applied for a permanent role with Ted Harvey. As a consequence I found myself leap-frogged to service in the CEO suite.

Number 600 George St was a luxurious set of fully restored 1930s style executive offices across four floors above the Plaza Theatre whose foyer ceiling incidentally was inlaid with tan pig skin and gold filigree. The Plaza is further evidence of another grand live theatre from a past age converted to cinema. It was eventually lost as a cinema due to a fast food conversion for KFC.

The austere offices were dark panelled wood with fine carpets, antique lift and an air of corporate importance and substance. The first floor was Peter Marrett's and Garry O'Connor's domain where I was ultimately to take up an office as well when I returned to the company to deliver some special projects.

The second floor was director suites including Ted and Fred – theatres and finance plus legal and the CEO suites. Third floor contained the general offices and above on fourth floor were boardroom, kitchens, a fine cellar and a magnificent film theatre and reception or entertainment area. The theatre walls were painted with pastel renaissance scene murals and quite beautiful.

The holy-of-holies was the second floor. One would proceed down the plush carpeted dark panelled corridors, right turn, knock and wait for permission. Dale Turnbull commanded from a large office inherited, I understand, from his father Ernest who was the previous CEO. Hoyts was a predominantly Australian owned private company with a part interest by 20th Century Fox Film Corporation who subsequently took complete control. The reception area to the CEO enclave was large and included a walk-in kitchen, store room and bathroom access into the CEO office.

Beautifully appointed with valuable antiques, this suite of rooms was to be maintained at a constant 72 degrees Fahrenheit with certain humidity at all times. Dale's secretary was the very efficient Margaret Truelove. In preparation for eventually serving the CEO I had studied Pitman Script and done a typing course as the role was described as an assistant / secretary. My ability to effectively double for Margaret resulted in my serving as assistant with expanded duties and responsibilities for nearly two years. I gained invaluable board experience in this rich environment.

Working in this capacity meant Margaret and I controlled access to Dale and I also frequently represented his interests on special committees and project groups. These folded back into greater involvement with theatre division and finance. As an environment for stimulating learning, deal development, strategic and logistical planning and negotiation this role and position was crucial in my development, so much so I was the first to graduate from the programme and find a place.

Looking back on my fellow trainees I have searched the Internet to fact check but came up with less than my recall, so here goes

with apologies if I get it wrong. It appears Wayne was posted to Adelaide and subsequently left Hoyts entering the performing arts. Wayne was a brilliant gambler, playing poker I think. I had the task of giving James the push from Hoyts but we stayed in touch for many years. Phil returned to Melbourne to work on the biggest multiplex development for the company and subsequently joined the family taxi business. Garry made a lifetime career in the company beyond my service and retired to run his own tennis complex.

A wine connoisseur and food buff, Dale Turnbull held excellent daily working luncheons in the 4th floor boardroom adjacent to the private screening theatre. He had a substantial and very valuable wine collection in the office, at his Queen Street, Woollahra home and at the Turnbull country estate in regional NSW. The country cellar was subterranean.

After lunch, Ted would repair, I love that word in this context, to the aptly named theatre; with a bottle to view prospective film offerings from the distributor network. If Dale had an interest in a title but lacked the time, I would be delegated to sit-in and write a synopsis, hence my high total viewings.

Part of the job was to also handle banking, dry cleaning and a range of personal services including some chauffeuring for the CEO. Dale learned I had additional driving skill sets. This gave rise to two transporter tasks. First was to deliver his new bright orange BMW Coupe to him. I had to drive it from Sydney to Canberra. Oh! The Joy. Alan Lewis was almost apoplectic.

He tried stopping the journey using insurance issues, my youth and attitude, alleging inappropriate use of my services and finally it was to be done on a non-work day, a Saturday. Dale actually enjoyed the exchange with Allan because he uncharacteristically left his office door open so Margaret and I could listen in. His defence of me as appropriate was most complimentary and appreciated. I enjoyed driving this sports car immensely and made a safe delivery. I stayed in Canberra at company expense for the weekend and flew back.

It was because I had a Mini the second request was made. Fox was moving to buy all of Hoyts. Dennis Stanfill, Chairman and CEO of Fox, visited for the early stages of what was eventually to be the 1979 90% acquisition of the company. A parade of Fox executives filtered through the offices. One was Sol Swartz, who had a fierce reputation as the hatchet man for Fox. I was to collect Sol from the airport and bring him to the office. By Mini. No limousine. Now Dale had been a passenger in my car on a few occasions when I drove so he knew my style.

Swartz was a tiny man who fitted comfortably into the front passenger seat of the two-door vehicle. The chicane style ride must have been a new experience to an executive who was usually in the rear of a stretched limo at a steady pace. Instead here he was in a suitcase on wheels and weaving in and out of traffic with no safety buffer zone in front.

Ted, Fred and Dale roared with laughter when I related Sol's surprise on seeing "Your car, Sir.", and his expressions during his ride to 600 George Street. It was Ted who told me Sol's method of dismissal was to physically dismantle the office of the deposed executive and isolate him from all contact without an assistant, phone or fax. For the few days Sol was present, I checked every morning my space still existed. I actually got on really well with Mr S.

The local film industry association was called the 47 Club and comprised executives and senior people from all film distribution houses, cinema chains, the TV industry and associated suppliers. The club's main role was to hold events to raise funds for the Motion Picture Industry Benevolent Fund (MPIBS) in support of industry people who fell on hard times. I had joined the club in 1971 and now joined the committee and rose to become President in 1975 for my fundraising efforts. I served as a Trustee for MPIBS from 1975 until 1977. (The industry kindly kept inviting Carol and me to screenings and meetings well into the 80s along with Movie Ball invitations until they ceased holding them.)

MPIBS had two main events each year. One was the annual Movie Ball for local film and TV and international guests of films

currently opening across Australia. And two, I started an annual gambling night at the Regent. Between these industry activities we raised many tens of thousands annually. A close association with the then new Hilton Hotel was formed and the Annual Movie Balls were held at the Hilton for many years. The balls had a longer prior history at the Trocadero which was demolished and replaced by the Sydney Cinema Centre multiplex. The gambling nights were fun and well attended especially by the police from Central Precinct across the road. We were never raided for the gambling which was for charity but illegal.

A feature of the Movie Ball was the production of a risqué magazine to be distributed on the night. Attendees would eagerly await production to find out how they had fared. Not being included was as much an insult as being lampooned in print or by image. Old copies are collector pieces from the period.

The Movie Ball is traditionally fancy dress and decorated tables with movie themes. Lots of terrific donated prizes for costumes and table decor. One year Carol and her friends went as clowns. Carol's sister, Wendy, still lived in Australia before moving to Stratford-upon-Avon in the UK. She arrived in our room at the hotel to be greeted at the door by Carol in full clown costume and make-up. Wendy introduced herself and asked for her sister. She didn't recognise Carol standing in front of her. It was a wild night once Carol realised she was incognito to just about everyone attending. She charged a dollar for a fun look at her frillies inside her clown hoop dress. All for charity. Naughty girl!

The best gambling night ever was using the sound system installed for the Daltry/Russell movie *Tommy*. The best Movie Ball was with Lainie Kazan and Maureen McGovern as guest performers. Can Lainie sing, or what! McGovern sang the theme song from *The Poseidon Adventure* which had just won an Oscar for Best Original Song. One year we had Mr Movie film buff *Bill Collins* and *Dorrie* from the TV series *Number 96* as guests.

My logistical skills first developed through executing these events for the 47 Club proved invaluable in producing a television

fund raiser for the Nimrod Theatre in 1982, then the New South Wales Bicentennial Arts and Entertainment Programme in 1988.

I had also commenced a set of adult learning courses at TAFE and Macquarie University in computer programming, sales psychology, economics and a technical college course in interior design. I completed the design course for a purpose. As mentioned, Hoyts was demolishing the Trocadero Ballroom to make way for a multiplex cinema. Part of my future role was as liaison with Leslie Walford on the interior fit out. My understanding of design elements and contract criteria won a settlement of \$80,000 over the professionals.

Perhaps an interesting but little known design pointer about the Sydney Cinema Centre is it was constructed to provide the foundation and support for a sky scraper to be included and to house a Sheraton hotel with a heliport on the top. The special foundations also insulate the structure from the Sydney underground railway which is directly below. If I recall the whole thing floats on rubber footings.

For no reason other than Charles Bronson's character, Arthur Bishop in the film *The Mechanic* (1972) applied this skill I took a course and learned to lip-read. While the talent is now very rusty the skill has been very useful over the years. Continued practice definitely makes perfect. Watching newsreaders is excellent practice.

I still had two nights a week when I was unoccupied so I enrolled for night classes in wine and food appreciation at the Darlinghurst Technical College. For the small enrolment fee I ate well, met nice people and expected to learn much. Well, for me it was a little. I found what I had experienced by watching Vince cook and also listening to him talk about wines and spirits; my preparatory assistance to Bernard plus talking wine with Dale Turnbull and a natural flair for food preparation I was soon ahead of the lecturers. The standard curriculum course fare was French and not much more.

Just for the fun I wrote a complete 13-week set of teaching notes and recipes for a practical (get your hands dirty doing it)

course in Asian Cooking. I followed this with an expanded French selection, followed by German and Italian. I adapted from my collection of cook books, updated and generally experimented with variations. This was nothing more than me filling in time and enjoying the creative process.

Some time later a college teacher was injured and was absent for a period. Our class assistant stepped into the role and I was elected to second by the class. The poor assistant fresh from exams was awful. I stepped up. Two weeks in and the course supervisor asked if I would like to do the formal requirements for teacher training certification. I did. Connie Lynch was a powerhouse and a great administrator, food scientist and teacher. She and Connie's deputy, Blanche Hopkins, were a pleasure to work with and to learn from.

Connie and her husband lived at Cottage Point in part of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. I was a frequent visitor and she urged me into my first community service role as PR manager for the local volunteer fire brigade. This entitled me to a car sticker granting permission to enter the park whenever it was on fire. A dubious privilege I thankfully only had to use once in two years.

Two terms later I had my own classes twice a week using my own notes and recipes. Every class was hands-on and enrolments stood at a 50 person waiting-list. I was paid modestly to do something I really enjoyed. I made Hoyts aware of this activity so I could leave as close to 5.30pm when teaching. Dale accommodated me but only after I did a challenge to the office caterers' food in the boardroom for him and was assessed as good as, perhaps more innovative.

Dale Turnbull was on an Australian Opera (AO) board committee. John Winter was the relatively recently appointed GM. Dale saw the need for a business approach to some operational aspects of AO. I was seconded to AO for six to twelve months as their first Commercial Manager. The start date of 1 April should have been a warning. Technically I resigned from Hoyts with the understanding all benefits were held in place if I returned within

a year. During this time Dale Turnbull would also leave Hoyts. I wonder if this factored into his encouragement for me to move to the AO.

My role was to create a support unit to co-ordinate and manage administrative, service and project functionality in support of artistic activity including performances. The role also involved staff, office, facility management and contracts.

I worked closely, after an initial stand-off, with Moffat Oxenbould. On the first day I was flung a contract and told to do a new one for Carlo Fellini Cellario to conduct for the following season. I applied some of my commercial knowledge in dealing with contracts for film actors visiting Australia and came back with a draft containing new beneficial two-way performance conditions. Moffat cooled somewhat. I stand in awe of his artistic achievements, knowledge and contribution to opera.

The AO experience didn't work for them or me. Opportunities to make improvement, change inefficient practices and establish new income centres were repeatedly deflected and defeated. I reviewed and made recommendations for change to sponsorship dealings to bridge a half-million dollar gap in grants and core sponsor support. That was tantamount to heresy. Great people, but change? No way. John Winter, himself challenged by the organisation's inertia and politics, agreed I should move on. I reconnected with Hoyts through Allan Lewis and received an invitation from Ted Harvey, who was interim CEO, to come back in August 1974.

Dear Fred McKay took me aside and said, "Now you know we are not offering you the top job." And he was dead serious in thinking I even expected a look in. I was appointed Manager, Special Assignments. Basically I was sent to fix up any part of the business viewed by the board or executive as needing attention. The initial tasks covered two subsidiaries ADS Displays and Hoyts National Exhibitions (HNE). I gained excellent and useful experience in the, incentive, convention and exhibitions or MICE sector (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions). HNE staged

these events for corporates resulting from successful national and international competitive bidding.

ADS provided the technical fulfilment for HNE such as the modular stands, stages, panels, furnishings and signage – everything you will see at such events. The experience proved very useful decades later when I successfully bid to hold one of the largest conventions and exhibitions in the world in Sydney.

With executive approval I made organisational changes to both businesses, changed some roles, reporting lines and tightened up a range of business practices to avoid conflicts of interest and clarify contractual obligations between the two. I did not directly manage day-to-day, rather I worked with the two GMs to change and improve. When one couldn't hack it, I replaced him with a talented internal promotion. The Hoyts executive was pleased with the outcomes.

About this time span I had been contacted by Gary Campbell who was also moving to Sydney to partner with Bernard King on a series of Club extravaganzas. I found them digs while they searched for more permanent accommodation and became their driver to many a weekend gig. Now imagine a Mini with three passengers and costumes piled from the ceiling to the boot whizzing around the drag club venues. It was huge fun.

Thirty years later on the Sunshine Coast I met a resort manager, Rod Stringer, who looked kind of familiar. Rod worked out we'd met when he worked at one of the top gay drag clubs called Capriccio's on Oxford Street. Gary and Bernard would declare me off-limits from attention as I sat at the bar among the heavy cigarette pall and dreadfully over made-up drag queens. The shows were fabulous as only queens can deliver. I never paid for a drink and was told the tragic life stories of some famous heavily disguised or incognito people around town. Mum's still the word.

Bernard took off on day-time TV and his cooking demonstrations became legendary. The two moved to better transport arrangements and Bernard purchased a house in Bondi where the wonderful Sunday parties resumed. When I moved to Doris

Street, North Sydney my clique nickname was 'Doris Donovan' with the added epithet, "but mind, he is boringly straight." Gary also did a lot of cruise ship entertainment work.

Terry was an excellent poker player, learned from his army days. He would visit occasionally, sleep all day and take my new Mazda Rotary Capella out of an evening to Kings Cross. . Whenever he needed cash he came to Sydney and played poker for a few days before returning home to pay the bills. The bugger never paid rent or topped up the fuel he used or apologised for burning a hole in the driver door lining. Still, we were closer than we had been growing up and this meant more to me.

Vince had brought me to Sydney as a young teenager in the mid-60s. We stayed at the Kirketon Hotel in Darlinghurst Road and it turned out to be not far from where Terry gambled years later. On our last night, Vince apologised to me for being an embarrassment as a father. This man who I loved more than my mother felt huge guilt, at least in his eyes, in not having been a better father than he thought he was. I cried a lot that night and so did he.

Vince had difficulty sharing his emotions and feelings. Moya ruled and he had gotten used to it and lost much of what he regarded as manliness. Neither of us ever raised the issue again. If I had I may know more about him, his accomplishments and being my dad. My brother never filled in any of this for me either. Mind you, I didn't ask or seek too forcefully either, so it is my loss for not pushing.

My life was about to change in a big way. In a flat across the hall from me in the Glen Ormiston, apartment block in Milsons Point, North Sydney lived Sharon. Sharon knew of my various relations with a number of single women in the apartment block. One in particular Dorothy von Takach worked in PR for Frog Records and wrote me a complimentary note on a photo of her published in the Telegraph newspaper.

I invited Sharon and a girlfriend to an advance movie screening in the luxurious 4th floor theatrette at the office. I was busy

with the organising and didn't pay them much attention so I drove them home in Dale's BMW as a treat. Of course, I was showing off. Dale was overseas. I then invited both girls to the next gambling night but again ignored them as I was busy with running the show. Sharon's friend rightly thought I was arrogant. It so happened her girlfriend wanted to attend an engagement party but needed a partner. Sharon suggested me, only to have the notion firmly rejected based on my poor showing so far. Sharon persevered.

I agreed to partner but only if we could have dinner and for me to apologise for my rudeness and to try to repair the bad impression I had thoughtlessly created. Carol Barker and I have now been together for over forty years at the time of writing these memoirs.

The romance between us took off at light speed. In fact about a fortnight into the relationship Carol asked for a break from the heated involvement. I was devastated until she explained she needed a night at home to do her washing as she had no clean underwear left.

Carol's mum Ruth was Canadian. Ruth Barbara Taylor met her Australian fighter pilot Ken Barker during WWII. Ruth's dietician sister Nancy Taylor was a Major in the Canadian Air Force. Nancy Taylor married Kenneth Galbraith and they divided their time during the year between Nancy's mother's house in Ottawa and their cottage on the Rideau Lakes near Smith Falls in Ontario.

Carol's family tree on her mother Ruth's side can be traced to King Charles II of England. The lineage runs via William Mercer Wilson, the first Grandmaster Mason of Canada who was the illegitimate son of Graeme Mercer of Mavisbank, Scotland. This was revealed during the bicentennial celebrations of his birthday in 2013. Graeme Mercer was great-grandson of Charles II. His grandfather, George Swan (1658- 1730) was one of the twelve illegitimate children the King sired by seven different mistresses! Ironically, given a Strathtyrum connection, Prince William, through his mother Diana, would become the first King descended directly from Charles II.

So it seems as though Charles II could well be Carol's sixth or seventh great grandfather.

Until 2012, Carol's aunt Nancy held swords belonging to *Bonnie Prince Charlie*. I suggested they should be publically on display but Nancy sold them to a collector.

Carol worked as a legal assistant for JG Jenner one of Sydney's top land titles search services in 1973. I was to speak at a film conference on the Gold Coast and asked her to drive up the east coast from Sydney with me. Her grandmother had just died so she felt an obligation to stay for the funeral but at the urging of other family she agreed to the trip. We never stopped talking for the 12 hours of the journey and formed the bond which has sustained us since.

Bandstand was a popular contemporary music show on TV back then. Carol was a devotee. I had never heard of it. This became a joke for all our married life as a jibe at my purely classical interests. Even so, Carol loved our subscriptions to the Old Tote Theatre, the opera, ballet and concerts as she took to the classics under my tutelage. I learned from her but admit 'modern stuff' isn't my bag. Whenever I get too high-horse about the arts, she brings me down with a thump saying, "He's never heard of *Bandstand*, you know." To which we all laugh and I am put in my place.

At this time I lived in my nice two bedroom apartment in Doris Street only 300 metres from Sharon in the Glen Ormiston complex. I actually sub-let a room to a mature lady whose name remarkably was Doris. Carol moved in. It worked for a time but eventually Doris exited and not on the best of terms. I think she mainly missed perving on another tenant in the block.

Ron Partington owned a flame red Fiat which he lovingly washed and polished on Saturday afternoons under Doris' bedroom window, stripped and bare-chested, muscled and trim, tanned and looking good. Even Carol said she appreciated the eye-candy.

Sharon moved to a house in Mosman on the lower North Shore. I had sold her my Mini some time before. Mini died shortly after.

Sharon was backing out of her driveway and a bus took off Mini's rear. Sharon was not hurt, thankfully.

Bernard had an open-house. I knew numbers for his buffet style afternoons didn't worry our host so I took Carol unannounced. Usually when Bernard opened the door to greet there were lots of air or cheek kissing, friendly gropes and arse squeezes. All in good fun. I was unsure just how Carol would react so when the door was flung open and Bernard rushed forward I stepped back and offered him a handshake while simultaneously saying, "Hi, Bernard, I'd like you to meet my fiancée, Carol".

The expression, 'pussies-bum' is rather apt here given the camp look on Bernard's face. He stepped past me, took Carol under his wing and announced he had a thing or two to tell her about me. With a camp flourish he shut the door in my face. Naturally, he was taking the piss out of me. Everyone made Carol welcome but my ribbing went on all afternoon. We were all to remain great friends until Bernard's accidental death in December 2002.

In mid 1974, an opportunity arose to teach at the North Sydney Technical College Annex not far from the apartment; not food but interior design. The department rushed me through the appropriate teacher training course which I passed easily.

I had completed two part-time teaching terms when another opening, to this time teach the practical food and wine course, was offered. A number of my Darlinghurst students (adults) were from the North Shore so I was guaranteed a base enrolment to carry the minimum class numbers required. Instead of demonstration style, I moved to practical format and added wine – read drinking on the job here – to all courses. With a maximum of 30 spots in the kitchen and with excellent word-of-mouth we were fully enrolled. In fact, within three terms, the waiting list grew to over 100 names.

Carol was in every class. The classes subsidised our meal needs and we met many new friends some of whom were to be sources of clients in just a few years as our work situation changed. The class format was wine, menu preparation, table service, dining

and clean-up. The supply of fresh produce was more than needed so everyone ate well. As the only course consuming and using wine, the occasional glare from those in other classes listening to a lecture rather than doing the doing, was to be expected. My challenge was to be ahead with interesting new techniques or unusual food items. Two such come to mind.

Goose isn't common even today. Back in early 1974 it was even less so. The school had taken delivery of a new gas BBQ, one of the first to be manufactured for indoor use. I was offered first test. It was to be Asian skewers but due to an order mix-up we got a goose but no chicken. Don't ask! Stupid here decided to BBQ the goose indoors. The outcome was Goose Asian Style, accompanied by well blacked new BBQ with melted venetian blinds on the side. Standard fare in your top cooking class.

The fire brigade man explained the goose fat had flared up and took out the plastic venetians. Really! Mate, I was standing in front of the wall of fire as it happened and the 'whoosh' almost made me drop my very good chardonnay. I had singed hair as testimony to the fact. The class laughter didn't die down for weeks whenever a BBQ was suggested.

A *dodine* is a very old treat whereby deboned fowl of alternatively white then dark meats are stuffed inside one another. I believe traditionally one starts with a sparrow and finishes with a swan. Exclusively for royalty it isn't done much now days much to the relief of swans. It is now more commonly just the reference to deboning a duck for insertion in a turkey with some reshaping of bone cavities using interesting stuffing and finally a chicken as an outer sleeve. Anyway, I'd had a bit too much white wine during one class and asked if anyone had seen a *dodine* done. They had not.

Calling upon anatomical lessons from my brother's vet study days, I proceeded to debone a chicken from the inside to produce a flat singlet of meat without broken skin. They were suitably amazed. I was dumbfounded. Carol said, "I didn't know you could do that!" My equally surprised response was "Neither did I". The *dodine* was to become a feature of my future catering business

sooner than I expected. I even supplied them to a number of delis on Sydney's lower north shore. They were very popular with the fashionable North Shore set.

When Carol and I wed, the wonderful staff and students of the Third Term 1975 class prepared a great, rich, French, three course meal with a croquembouche for desert all supervised by the college staff assistant, Raelene Don.

For Christmas 1974 Carol and I drove to Brisbane and stayed with my brother, Christine and their two kids, Samantha and Myles. Carol and I visited Moya and Vince on Christmas Eve afternoon. Hot, humid with the usual heavy storm threatening this was a portent of the extreme day to follow when Vince would slave over the full hot traditional fair menu. Well that was until I fell afoul of Moya.

Mum took me to task when I disagreed, not with her wish but the way in which her wish, to have a son who could either become Pope or Prime Minister, could be achieved. Ignoring my views on religion and criticising me for failing school and thereby preventing a political career alternative, she became teary to which I told her to pull herself together and get over it as I wasn't interested in either. Not a good move.

When we arrived back at Chris and Terry's place we were asked what had happened as Moya had telephoned and 'cancelled' Christmas. Vince had phoned with the message. Moya's passive aggressive approach also meant no festive visit to see her young grandchildren, a huge waste of food and a generally glum non-celebration. Finding food in mid-70s Brisbane on Christmas Day was a tall order. A roast chicken from a Lebanese Take-away had to do.

When I see Alan Rickman's Sheriff of Nottingham character in Robin Hood speak the line "and while you're at it, cancel Christmas" it is déjà-vu. If I was not over my mother by then this did it for me. To this day, Christmas holds little of family in it for me.

John Mostyn's reign at Hoyts commenced in November 1974. At the time my day job had me project managing the

reorganisation of the two Hoyts subsidiaries, Australian Display Services and Hoyts National Exhibitions. A third project was in researching new concession operations to expand out of purely confectionary and drinks. Added to this my interior design liaison for the newly rising seven cinema complex on the old Trocadero site. The annual gambling nights had ceased because the Regent had been sold to Leon Fink and closed in preparation for demolition. Heritage terrorism! I still organised the annual Movie Balls as a fancy dress highlight in July each year.

Mostyn wanted to reorganise the business of Hoyts. A bunch of us, including every executive director, was sent to Chandler Macleod for tests as to role suitability and, as it turned out, intelligence testing. Mostyn subjected himself to the same test as a benchmarking exercise in arrogance. Apparently, John had a particular need to know the IQ of people working for him. It seemed he liked some distance between him and those who might challenge his intellect. No doubt he was smart but apparently not so smart Fox's Dennis Stanfill didn't eventually put a stop to some self-indulgent practices just a few short years hence.

I duly sat for the bank of tests and was asked to wait. I was then asked to do a different test set for one particular test. Basically a repeat. I learned within two days all other test subjects' positions were finalised by Allan Lewis in HR. I asked Allan about mine and was told it was with the MD.

A memo arrived a week later advising my transfer full time to Concessions under the director Les Randall. Not a job or boss I would have voluntarily accepted if I had had any choice. I did not pursue the test result issue until one day Allan's PA and I met in the elevator. I asked her for a copy and was told it was confidential to the company but my aptitude and scores fitted me for my new role. Bullshit! I was a glorified logistics manager in a suburban depot. I formally applied to see the test report and was declined. In those days access to HR files was a discretionary decision by the bosses.

I called Chandler Macleod but was referred back to the company. They called Allan Lewis and I was carpentered for asking outside of Hoyts. Margaret Truelove had resigned and her replacement and I worked very well together under Dale, then Ted and Fred. I met Fae Johnson for a drink and relayed my dilemma. She quite rightly declined to provide a copy of the test. The issue became a challenge for my inquisitiveness and sense of fairness.

As it happened I was in the lift in Head Office and Mostyn stepped inside. Two big men in a small space. I was direct and asked him for a copy of the results. He went scarlet, drew deeply on his cigarette and fled the elevator without a word. Now this was a man who had more front than a Myer department store. Within minutes Randall my new boss had me carpentered in his office yelling at me for challenging the MD. I was ordered not to speak to Mostyn and not to ask for the test results again. I dug in and bided my time.

I can take some credit for, or be blamed for, the introduction of pin-ball machines in cinemas and the opening up of foyer entertainment in the new style of multiplex-cinemas popping up across the country. I had provided a discussion paper on the need to engage patrons outside of the screen area and through this sell more junk food as the profit margins were very high. The idea was an extension of pin-balls as part of the promotion surrounding the movie *Tommy* as previously mentioned. Hoyts acquired the amusement machine firm of Goddard Industries in 1979.

I stayed relatively low profile in my new position which provided little challenge. Vince had a bad car accident in early 1975. Terry said he was OK and no reason to make the trip to Brisbane. On Sunday, 25 August 1975 after a series of heart attacks in quick succession and before I could get to see him, Dad died.

On the Friday before this bad news my boss Les Randall sent a memo advising in two weeks I was to take up the post of Concessionaire Manager for Western Australia, a demotion. It also cancelled my advance application for leave to marry in November that year.

I went to him and explained I had just received news of my father's death and asked for reconsideration of the start date. He refused and recited an oft repeated tale of his hardships as a youth in the Navy and how it made him stronger through adversity. I went to HR and asked for guidance. Allan Lewis was surprisingly sympathetic but could not get Randall to change his mind. I left Allan's office and went to the elevator.

I learned later Allan called Fred McKay on my behalf. Fred was on the phone to Randall when Mostyn stormed into Fred's office ordering my dismissal. Guess who had been in the elevator when it stopped for me? I had let fly at the CEO.

Enclosed with the severance cheque was a typed note – *"Your report gives you a ranking that is much higher than JM across all measures"*. It was unsigned. To this day I have no idea what my rankings for the tests were.

I left Hoyts on 21 October 1975. Seven years later the tables would be turned between John and me. Not by design but by circumstance.