

## LAUNCH

As I began reading the first pages of the biography Of Googie Withers and John McCallum called 'Double Act' by Brian McFarlane, I couldn't stop. I read them and reread them. The wonderful writing and perfectly realized memories swept me back to my boyhood.

I lived in Canberra, and at the early age of eight, the second world war began. For us, safe in our capital city, this proved an adventurous time, with gas masks and marching and digging trenches and soldiers coming home on leave from battlefields abroad.

With Scottish parentage many of our relatives were enduring the bombing raids over Glasgow and many in London. One of my parent's friend was a lady called Edith, who knew of my childhood love of theatre and film, and one of my most treasured memories was receiving at regular intervals parcels of magazines about British theatre and film. I would read every word and save all the pictures, dreaming of one day, becoming part of it.

Among my many treasures were photos of a beautiful actress with the strange name of Googie Withers and among others was one of a handsome young soldier called John McCallum, who, to my delight turned out to be Australian.

Saturday afternoons were always spent in the cinema and many of these films were British and filled with heroes & heroines of the war as bombs continued to rain down on Britain. Finally the war came to an end but the careers of Googie and John continued climbing and I would relish sitting with my creamy toffee and seeing them both in my Saturday movies. 2

I remember particularly persuading my mother to take me to an evening performance in order to see 'Pink String and Sealing Wax'.

It was this magic that provoked me into swearing to myself that I would one day go to England and become an English actor.

Determined as I was to do this it would take another five years before I could save enough money to take a P & O liner to England in 1951.

Of course, there was no way of meeting the glorious pair and I went my own way into the profession to become a professional actor. A few years later, when I decided to return to Australia in order to escape a call up into the Army.

I found to my complete astonishment that John had returned also, with Googie, his new bride, to take over the management of the beautiful Comedy theatre in Melbourne and began to produce wonderful theatre and new Australian work. Brian's book recounts this with great relish and in proudest way.

On my return I joined the great John Sumner, at the Union theatre in the Melbourne university, leaving acting behind and slowly becoming a director. 3

Everything at the Comedy had to be seen at least twice while, with John we began The Melbourne Theatre Company at the tiny Russell street theatre.

I finally met Googie and John and their smiles of welcome and friendship made me feel so proud that we were all part of a theatre renaissance, gaining new audiences in Melbourne.

Then one day the great lady came to Russell street to become part of the cast of Sumner's production of Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard.

Soon after this, on a day never to be forgotten, John asked me to direct 'An Ideal Husband' of Oscar Wilde at the Comedy theatre, with Googie playing the wonderful and wicked Mrs. Cheveley.

I remember sitting in the theatre alone and quivering. I was back suddenly to my boyhood and those magazines. It had all come to pass. In the production, the cast contained a dear friend of mine, Dinah Shearing with whom I had worked already and included the best from our Company, Simon Chilvers, Dennis Olsen, and Frank Thring.

To rehearse with Googie was to become instantly aware that here was a born actress. The stage was her home. On this platform she became vividly alive and knew, with unnerving accuracy, what to do with the role. My job was to make sure the environment and world around her was carefully crafted. A wonderful set was given to us by Hugh Colman and the wardrobe was a joy. Googie gradually grew into the character and exploded across the stage on Opening night. A night to remember all my life. 4

*KINGFISHER GOLF*

During this time a lasting friendship sprang up for me with John and Googie, and we did more work together. During these years their young daughter, Joanna joined our theatre company for a year before taking off to England to continue a very fine career in the theatre, like her mother before her.

While working at the little Russell street theatre a number of people wrote about our work in various magazines. Of course I told everyone a dreadful lie when I denied reading any form of criticism, when in fact I read everything printed about us. One of those writers was a man called Brian McFarlane whose writing I came to look forward to as he seemed to be a true lover of theatre with the knowledge to back it up. Brian seemed to be truly proud of Australia and the work beginning to come from the theatre world.

In the years ahead I had the greatest pleasure in reading a review of my own autobiography, and Brian's words remain with me with great pleasure. 5

When he rang me, to inform me that he was beginning to write a biography of Googie and John, I couldn't think of anyone more suitable to write such a wonderful story, not only for the important history of Australian Theatre but as a dedication to these two wonderful artists.

To read 'Double Act' is to take an amazing journey through a century of Theatre and Film history with Googie and John striding beside you. The enduring record of their work lives well and truly within its pages and you learn very quickly that these two artists were two of the most important members of our profession. They came to be known in my heart and will remain so --as Royalty. - a truly royal couple.

Thank you Brian, you have delivered a right royal tribute.

Thank you.