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My greatest love

A diva abandons fame to marry her sweetheart from Dandenong High, writes PAUL GRAY



IF BALMAIN boys don't cry, Springvale girls don't whinge. Not if Lauris Elms is the standard.

One of Australia's top opera singers, the 70-year-old mezzo-soprano, born in Melbourne's outer east, can truly say she has had the world at her feet.

And that she gave it away for love, marriage and the development of her country.

Of her marriage to husband Graeme, for which she abandoned her European career to return to Australia in 1959, she says today: "I was *not* happy coming back to Australia, because I knew it was going to be a small, provincial pond to swim in, rather than a big sea.

"But, on the other hand, I thought he was worth it. I'm extremely glad I married my husband."

Elms has been honoured with the launch of her memoirs, *The Singing Elms* (Bowerbird Press), by her friend and fellow performer, Dame Joan Sutherland.

Now living near Sydney's Olympic Games site, Elms speaks warmly of her early days in the then "country towns" of Dandenong and Springvale.

"It was totally different," she says. "Dandenong was a market town that served Gippsland's dairy farms and the market gardens of Keysborough and Dingley."

As a girl, Elms rode her bike down a deserted Springvale Rd to a poultry farm, where she learned violin from concert violinist Stella Nemet, a Polish refugee.

The Nemets introduced her to a world of European culture that led her to the opera stages of Australia, England and Israel.

AT LONDON'S Covent Garden in the 1950s, she was surrounded by Australian singers, including Sutherland, Albert Lance and John Shaw. "It was a very happy time in my life," she says.

"I was singing full-time every day, and that didn't happen after I came back to Australia. That was such a joy."

The talk today is of a "brain drain". In the '50s there was a seepage of singers as some of the world's top opera talent left these shores to find work overseas.

This followed the collapse in 1954 of the pioneering Melbourne-based National Theatre. Elms heaps praise on the theatre's founder, Gertrude Johnson.





Diva double: (above) Lauris Elms (left) and Dame Joan Sutherland at the launch of Elms' memoirs. Picture: GUY WILMOTT

Stage presence: (far left) in full voice during her heyday.

Young and beautiful: (left) on the brink of a great career, she gave it away for love.

"Gertrude Johnson started the National Theatre in Melbourne in the '30s and '40s and kept it going. Each year she'd put on a short opera season."

Like Elms, all of the National Theatre's singers had paid daytime jobs and sang "for the love of it".

Nevertheless, the company put on many outstanding productions that boosted interest in opera.

"The first opera I ever saw was a wonderful production with Marjorie Lawrence," Elms says.

"She sang the role of the princess in *Aida* from a wheelchair because she had polio. It was fantastic to hear that voice."

The collapse of the National Theatre followed an expensive season to mark Queen Elizabeth's first visit to Australia in 1954. That meant no more work for many singers here.

For Elms, though, it led to two years singing development in Paris and full-time work with "a wonderful company and with lots of Australians" at Covent Garden.

In 1959, Elms' career was set to blossom. Management at the Covent Garden company thought so highly of her talent they offered her a much-prized study scholarship for a year in Italy.

SHE turned it down — because she had recently married her friend from Dandenong High School days, the academic Graeme de Graeff, and had made a commitment to return to Australia.

Here Lauris Elms made a major contribution to Australian opera for many years, but never scaled the heights of international fame.

Elms says one of the major reasons she and Graeme returned to Australia in 1959 was to help "the growth and development" of a nation still recovering from the effects of isolation and war.

Is such self-sacrificing patriotism out of style today? "I'm sad that there's so much more greed," she says. "I think that's the fault of our generation because we didn't pass our values on.

"We'd seen as children what poverty and lack of self-esteem could do to ordinary people. It was just horrendous."

***The Singing Elms* will be in bookshops at the end of the month, or directly from Bowerbird Press, $32.95 or $54.95 hard cover. Ph: (02) 9450 0430.**

Soprano a howling success

REVIEW
MUSIC

What: Inessa Galante
Where and when: Melbourne Concert Hall, Saturday
Reviewer: Kim Lockwood

A SLIGHTLY sour miaow was sung in some of the world's music salons in the late 1990s.

Inessa Galante, they sang, was a one-hit wonder, a single-song sensation. Sure, she did a good job with that one piece, but listen to the rest of her work.

Why? Jealousy? The bitchiness that lies in some artistic souls? Whatever it was, Galante proved them wrong on Saturday.

The Latvian soprano gave her first Australian recital to a crowded house, most of whom stood for the final ovation.

Six of her 14 songs and arias were also on her first record, 1995's *Debut*, including the one hit that set the cats a-clawing.



Galante

That was Giulio Caccini's *Ave Maria*, although on Saturday Galante lacked the sweeping cadences of Bellini's orchestral arrangement. She was accompanied only by piano, with Opera Australia's Sharolyn Kimmorley providing sympathetic support.

From the start — *Mi tradi* from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* — Galante showed she has a voice to be reckoned with.

Smooth legato runs and a pianissimo on high notes that was like a silken thread.

Who could not have thrilled to the descending glissando in Bellini's *Casta Diva*, the accuracy of the staccato attack in Verdi's *Tacea la notte* from *Il Trovatore* or the mixed emotions in Tchaikovsky's *Tatyana's Letter?*

Galante committed herself to every piece, with good acting and stagecraft.

She was generous to the audience, with three encores, including a wordless Albinoni *Adagio* and *Summertime*.

And that one hit, the *Ave Maria?* Suffice to say that at the end of a marvellous program by a brilliant singer with a superb voice, there was a Big Lump in the Throat. The cats may now retract their claws.