

Legendary comedian Barry Humphries dies, aged 89

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Barry Humphries has left this earthly stage, and taken with him his brilliant creations – Dame Edna Everage, Sandy Stone, Barry McKenzie and Sir Les Patterson. He was 89.

Humphries died in St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney, after complications arising from hip replacement surgery following a fall.

He was the greatest comedian, and possibly the greatest entertainer, Australia has produced.

Anthony Albanese [led the tributes](#), saying Humphries was one of a kind.

“For 89 years, Barry Humphries entertained us through a galaxy of personas, from Dame Edna to Sandy Stone,” he said on social media. “But the brightest star in that galaxy was always Barry. A great wit, satirist, writer and an absolute one-of-a-kind, he was both gifted and a gift. May he rest in peace.”

Rupert Murdoch, the executive chairman of News Corporation, said on the passing of his cherished friend: “In whatever guise, Barry was a genuine genius. His works, his creations, his spirit will echo across the generations and his friendship is eternal”.

His family including wife Lizzie Spender had been at his bedside during his hospital stay.

In a statement, his family said: “He was completely himself until the very end, never losing his brilliant mind, his unique wit and generosity of spirit. The characters he created, which brought laughter to millions, will live on.”

Across a career spanning almost seven decades, Humphries reduced audiences to tears of laughter, and much else besides. “Tragedy dampens the spirits,” he once said. “Comedy dampens the upholstery.”

A supreme clown and the sharpest of social satirists, Humphries took special delight in puncturing pomposity, ignorance and self-importance. Cant and woke were anathema to him.

With Dame Edna he created a comic grotesque – resplendent with her wisteria rinse and iridescent face furniture – who wielded condescension like a weapon. As Sir Les, he elevated vulgarity into an art form. “Are you with me?” he would say as he dropped another double entendre.

Humphries’s act came fully alive in the theatre where his audience were also his victims. But the television talk show could almost have been made for him.

Humphries’s comic genius spread through the English-speaking world thanks to his countless TV appearances with hosts including Michael Parkinson, Clive James and Joan Rivers.

It was disconcerting, in the rare moments that Humphries allowed it, to hear the voice of Dame Edna out of costume. In a 1987 TV interview with Clive James and comedian Peter Cook, Humphries – dressed like a bank manager in a pinstripe suit and red tie – came out with that familiar falsetto.

In Edna’s voice he said, “Barry Humphries is a passe entertainer who never was funny in my opinion, and I happen to know his mother agrees with me.”

Born in Melbourne in 1934, and schooled at Melbourne Grammar – but not educated, he pointed out – he gravitated early on to the bohemian world of theatre and the arts. He disdained sport, and loved dressing up and playing practical jokes, the more disgusting the better.

He joined the Union Theatre Repertory Company, and it was on a tour of regional Victoria with a production of Twelfth Night that he invented the character that became Mrs Edna Everage.

Over the years the housewife of Moonee Ponds became an Olympic Hostess, and then a dame, her celebrity growing in magnitude from superstar to megastar and,

finally, gigastar.

Another Humphries character, Barry McKenzie, was born in 1964 in a comic strip for the pages of British satirical magazine *Private Eye*. He gave the world many choice Ockerisms including the “technicolour yawn” and “point Percy at the porcelain”.

“I like the word chunder very much, which was Barry McKenziese for being sick – sort of enjoying oneself in reverse,” Humphries explained.

Les Patterson, with his stained suit, tombstone teeth and prodigious appendage, was invented in 1974 to introduce Dame Edna at St George Leagues Club in Sydney.

But Sandy Stone was the polar opposite to Edna and Les, a sibilant geriatric given to droll and meandering memories about Melbourne of the olden days.

Humphries’s politics were once described as conservative contrarian, and almost anything could be a target.

He was good friends with *The Australian*’s late cartoonist, Bill Leak, who painted a portrait of him in character as Sir Les for the 2000 Archibald Prize. Humphries recognised Leak as a fellow traveller who was prepared to point out uncomfortable truths.

He said a Leak portrait of him was “so insulting, so disgusting, so regrettably lifelike, that I’m grateful to Bill every time I see it”.

Humphries’s humour and observations were not always appreciated.

His comic caricatures were the personification of cultural cringe, magnifying everything that was unworldly and embarrassing about Anglo Australians.

It was put to him more than once that his brand of comedy, paraded on the world stage, was against the national interest, presenting a poor image of Australians abroad.

He told Clive James: “It’s odd, isn’t it, that people like John Cleese – who make wonderful comedies about bad service in British hotels – never get rapped over the knuckles. But in Australia, you just have to make a few little jokes about our more endearing faults to be accused of treachery, and indeed pilloried as a traitor.”

His comments about transgender people in 2018 – he described trans identity as a “fashion”, and sex-change surgery as “self-mutilation” – led the Melbourne International Comedy Festival to cancel him, wiping his name from the Barry Award.

Among Humphries’s many stage shows were *A Nice Night’s Entertainment*, *An Evening’s Intercourse with Dame Edna* and *Back with a Vengeance*. In 2012 he announced what was supposed to be his “farewell tour” with *Eat! Pray! Laugh!*

But, Melba-like, he made a virtue of farewells, and was still on tour as recently as last year with his show *The Man Behind the Mask*. He had planned to return to the stage after his recent illness.

His outrageous antics disguised a cultivated taste for the fine arts, including French symbolist art, vintage Australiana and music of Weimar-era Germany.

Another of his enthusiasms was landscape painting which he enjoyed on travels in France and to the Flinders Ranges, sometimes with his friend, the late John Olsen.

Among his honours are the Order of Australia, the CBE, and he won a special Tony award for his Broadway show *Dame Edna: The Royal Tour* in 2000.

Humphries was married four times. He is survived by his wife, Lizzie Spender, and four children.

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