

**Anne Pender. *Seven Big Australians: Adventures with Comic Actors*.
Clayton, Victoria: Monash UP, 2019. 272 pp.
A\$29.95 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-925835-21-2**

Seven Big Australians: Adventures with Comic Actors looks at the childhoods and careers of the pioneers of classic Australian comedy—Carol Raye, Barry Humphries, Noeline Brown, Max Gillies, John Clarke, Tony Sheldon, and Denise Scott. Each actor in this book, Pender explains, helped define the classic understanding of Aussie humour. Looking at Anne Pender's previous work, she has extensive experience in interviewing personalities for biographies, and in particular, a complete biography of Barry Humphries (*One Man Show: The Stages of Barry Humphries*, 2010).

All the genuine highlights of this book are in the moments of personal reflection. Each chapter begins with some context of how Pender interviewed each actor. 'From the slowing train, I noticed Noeline patiently waiting for me on the platform at Mittagong, hands in her pockets, braced against the icy wind. She stood ramrod straight, elegant in large sunglasses and tailored trousers, looking ahead' (72). These paragraphs are thoughtfully constructed, and immediately help understand who we're dealing with. I felt like I understood each actor better through these descriptions, more than the biographies themselves.

When each chapter's biography begins, the descriptions turn cold. I realise this is intended, and it is stylistically appropriate to do so, but it is a jarring shift. Each biography is transcribed from interviews and converted into non-fiction prose, chronologically describing events in short bite sized chunks. It evokes something more like a detailed Wikipedia entry. As soon as the biographies break out of this form, you are reminded about the person behind the words. It isn't Pender's responsibility to make the reader laugh, obviously. She has set herself a task of the clinical biographer. It's just that the contrast—between the personalities she's writing about, and the stiffness with which she writes—is constantly at play, and at odds.

The stand out character is that of Carol Raye, who can't help but break through these clinical descriptions, leaping out the text to remind you these performers are full of charm and wisdom. For instance, in describing the first date with her future husband, the book reads: 'He was exuberant and merry, jumping up on a table and singing to the assembled guests. In telling me this story Carol launched into the song he sang as though it was yesterday' (15). Immediately, I wanted to hear more of the direct voice of the 96-year-old. Once or twice per chapter, Pender quotes from the original interview, and each time I simply craved to read the transcript, as chaotic and disorganised as they must have been. I realise this is a shame, as Pender's real work and talent is organising that chaos and linking it to further research, but the true story for me is hidden here. Pender created quite loving and friendly relationships with seven prolific performers—their personal reflections on their life and art seems to be buried behind objective biographies. Even Pender can't help but break out of her own form when signing off after the chapter on Barry Humphries ('Farewell Edna. Thank you Barry' 71) whom she obviously has a deep fondness for. A similar personal reflection comes after Tony Sheldon—the chapter focuses on Sheldon's fears and anxieties, and overcoming them throughout a massive career—as Pender quietly marvels at his versatility and brilliance. These moments may seem like an odd thing to mention—as well as the introductory paragraphs—but they stand out so prominently as Pender breaks out of the role of an unseen biographer that it almost feels like she's testing a creative non-fiction voice, held back with academic restraint. This all leads to

the chapter on Denise Scott ('Comedy Is Not Pretty' 238) carrying particular significance, possibly because it is the chapter with the most direct content quoted from the artist. It feels more personal, laced with Scott's self-deprecating thoughts, and is continually placed in a context of contemporary feminism. As a result, this chapter is by far the strongest, as each incident feels like an important point in a cohesive article.

The book has quite noble intentions. Biographies of comic actors aren't often sought after, and their escapades in theatre—on and off the stage—disappear after closing night. 'Actors are the public face of the performing arts, carrying the immediate responsibility of the success of each show. In spite of this they are frequently left out of theatre history' (vii). Whilst I wholly agree with this sentiment, Pender offers one or two sentences summarising moments of the various plays by quoting a joke, and a description of their outfit or movement. Max Gillies, for instance, appears in a sketch where he imitates a government advisor whose penis grows every time he tells a lie, or John Clarke makes a cameo appearance as a technician, or Carol Raye does a technically challenging dance. In the context of live theatre, all these moments may very well have landed beautifully, but in a biographical context they do not spark the imagination, apart from reminding you why theatre is so ephemeral.

On top of this, it is hard to avoid the fact that you are reading biographies of seven white people. Pender directly addresses this: 'This set of actors also reveals the fact that Australian comic performance was dominated by white Anglo-Celtic Australians for at least forty years after the War. It was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that comic performers of Indigenous heritage and from non-English speaking backgrounds came to prominence and transformed Australian comedy once more' (ix). This hangs over the reader throughout the book—especially as the childhood and early career stories of these comedians start to blend together. It begs for a larger collection with more diverse backstories and different perspectives. Pender is now in the perfect position to do it as well, and could very well position contemporary comedy performers alongside those in this collection.

The book is a no-nonsense documentation of each actor's career, and it does that with clear descriptions of the steps through their life. The descriptions may not read as particularly vivid, but *Seven Big Australians* does provide a detailed summary of their childhood situations, early discoveries, and career achievements. There are thoughtful moments of insight and personality, but these come few and far between. Perhaps this is all just in the nature of these performers—30 pages for a life hardly seems enough, particularly for these performers who have characters and flamboyant personas that are so present in the zeitgeist of the Australian performance landscape—that a biographical outline cannot possibly capture their humanness. It may not need to, as that was never the intention of this book, but the moments when they leak through promises a much more engaging work.

Tom Hogan, University of New South Wales