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Seaborn, Broughton & Walford Foundation Archives

Finding Aid to Papers of Gwen Plumb

Actor

1912-2002

Finding Aid Compiled by Neil Pollock (26 July 2017)

SBW Archives

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Foreword

This small collection of papers comprises correspondence, press clippings, photographs, a theatre program, printed play scripts and other papers relating mainly to Gwen Plumb's professional acting career.

At least some, possibly all, of the items were given by Gwen Plumb to Rodney Seaborn at the Independent Theatre on 17 March 1996 at a performance of *Hay Fever*.

Biographical Note

Obituary: Gwen Plumb

Radio, television and film actor.

Born Stanmore, Sydney, August 2, 1912. Died Kirribilli June 5, 2002, aged 89.

Gwen Plumb, who always said she had an overdeveloped sense of humour, was one of Australia's most successful popular entertainers. Off stage, she was hysterically funny company.

In a career that lasted more than 60 years, she covered every aspect of show business: vaudeville and pantomime, theatre and film, radio and television.

It was as Emmie in Australia's longest running radio serial, the ABC's *Blue Hills* (1949-76) that her popularity first took off. As Ada the tea lady in Nine's *The Young Doctors*, she became a household name.

Plumb left school when she was 15 and began her writing and broadcasting career as a copywriter. She also began writing amusing articles for women's magazines about her daily experiences. By 1941, she was producing the children's session for 2UE as well as writing scripts and acting in them.

She began her stage career with the Chelsea acting club and in 1939 won the Harry Tighe cup for best actor. She joined Doris Fitton's Independent Theatre and played leading roles in several plays including William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*, Karel Capek's *The Life of Insects* and new scripts by Australian writers Max Afford and Sumner Locke Elliott. A 1948 role in the British farce *See How They Run* at the Minerva Theatre in Kings Cross saw the beginning of her career as a comic actress.

In the 1940s and '50s, radio was the only sure source of income for actors. Other outlets for their talents were scarce. With the hectic radio scheduling of the times, there was little time to study parts. "You were always running from one job to another. I could beat trams," Plumb recalled. "I've hitched rides on trucks, just to get from one job to another. Anything not to be late."

She loved radio. "It was the most marvellous acting training of all. You had to learn how to think on your feet. How to act when you only had your voice to help you. And it was much more fun than almost anything else I've done."

In 1944, *The Lawsons* began on ABC radio. Plumb was cast as Emmie, the young servant girl. She played the role so naturally, with such disarming openness, that she won the hearts of listeners, and when the show finished in 1948, Emmie and her aunt, played by Nellie Lamport, were written into the new serial *Blue Hills*.

Mary Livingstone MD was another long-running radio soap opera in which she starred, and she featured regularly in plays, on panel shows and children's programs. "I used to love the kids' shows. You never knew whether you'd have to be a child or a lettuce."

Plumb ran women's sessions on 2GB from the '40s until 1974. "I did topical interviews, discussions with people in the news -- a lot more current affairs than the other women's shows were doing -- as well as book reviews and film and theatre reports."

In 1953, she went to London to cover the Queen's coronation. A female reporter carrying a tape recorder was most unusual in those days. The recorder resembled a sewing machine and weighed as much. Plumb lugged it all over London doing reports and interviews. Her coverage was so popular that it was repeated five times.

She stayed in London, keeping in touch with her listeners by sending back weekly tapes of interviews with celebrities and coverage of European events.

On her return to Sydney in early 1958, Plumb compered *Women's World* for ABC TV. She was also back with 2GB in which she and her great friend Gordon Chater, as Pussie and Charlie, struck sparks off each other. "Never have the airwaves shaken so much with nonsense and uncontrolled laughter," she recalled.

She was in the first production of the Old Tote Theatre Company's lunch-hour shows at the Palace Theatre in 1963 -- Edward Albee's *The American Dream* directed by John Clark, who later cast her as the nymphomaniac sister to Alexander Hay's lecherous brother fighting over the body of John Ewart in Joe Orton's *Entertaining Mr Sloane*.

When she appeared as one of the ugly sisters in *Cinderella* in 1965 at the Theatre Royal, one critic wrote: "Gwen Plumb and John Meillon work themselves to tatters in the tradition of second-rate circus clowns. Both are past masters of the pantomime art."

From 1976-82, she claimed a new wave of admirers playing Ada, the laconic, lovable busybody in the hospital kiosk of the top-rating soap *The Young Doctors*.

Steaming, by Nell Dunn, gave Plumb one of her favourite roles, that of Mrs Meadows. "I will never forget it. Huge belly laughs one minute, then dead silence when there was a scene of devastating pathos.". With Amanda Muggleton, Genevieve Lemon and Lynette Curran among others, *Steaming* opened in Sydney in 1982 and played around Australia until 1985.

In 1993, she was made a member of the Order of Australia.

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Items

Date Range: 1942-1995

No. of Items: 22

Quantity (shelf-length): 0.18m (1 standard archival box)

1. Correspondence:

1.01 - Letter from Frederick J. Gibson, Director of Theatre Royal, 1980

1.02 - Letter from Alan Jones, 1991.

2. Press clippings:

2.01 - *Three Girls and a Canoe – An Austerity Holiday for £4*, written by Gwen Plumb, describing a canoeing holiday on the Hawkesbury River, from *Woman*, Dec 21, 1942. 2 pages, mounted on card

2.02 - Eleven press clippings relevant to Plumb's acting career, including several relating to the television mini-series *The Harp in the South*. Date range: 06.05.1971 – 12.05.1987

2.03 - Typescript transcript of two newspaper articles regarding Plumb's role in a revue in England, dated 21.10.1955.

3. Photographs:

3.01 - B/w photographic print, 23cm x 29cm, labelled "Syd Wheeler, Gwen Plumb, Marshall Crosby (?), Nellie Lambert (?), John Tate – Macquarie Awards"

3.02 - B/w photographic print, 11cm x 8cm, labelled "Independent Theatre – Tennessee Williams 'The Time of Your Life'" [Note: *The Time of Your Life* was written by William Saroyan and performed at The Independent Theatre in May 1943 with Gwen Plumb in the cast]

3.03 - B/w photographic print, 20cm x 25cm, of seven people in the 2UE radio studio, labelled "Dorothy Dunckley, Muriel Steinbeck and Ethel Gabriel"

3.04 - B/w photographic print, 16cm x 22cm, labelled "Cast headed by Producer/Director Fifi Banvard – arriving Hobart to re-open the renovated Theatre Royal – 1949" followed by eight names – 'Fifi Banvard, Simon(?) Friend, Bebe Scott, Daphne Winslow, Molly Howell (Therese Desmond), June Mendoza, Teddy Howell'.

3.05 - One b/w and one colour photographic print, each 20cm x 25cm, both labelled "June Bronhill – Arsenic & Old Lace"

- 3.06 - A colour photographic print, 9cm x 13cm, labelled "Gwen Plumb, Sumner Locke Elliott"
- 3.07 - B/w photographic print, 25cm x 18cm, of Gwen Plumb and Kevin Leslie in *Richmond Hill*.

4. Other items:

- 4.01 - A pencil sketch of Gwen Plumb by Jim Russell, 21cm x 15cm
- 4.02 - A printed hymn sheet for Dame Doris Fitton Mason's funeral service, dated 1985
- 4.03 - A programme for *One Dam' Thing After Another*, final night at the Tivoli Theatre, Sydney, 26.03.1966, in which Gwen Plumb appeared
- 4.04 - A "Chart of Attendance at Marian St in 1983"
- 4.05 - Two Channel Ten flyers for *The Harp in the South* and *Richmond Hill*
- 4.06 - A single-page typescript article regarding the Independent Theatre renovations, with a photocopied related press cutting on the reverse, dated 24.08.1995.

5. Printed play scripts:

- 5.01 - *Born in the Gardens* by Peter Nichols
- 5.02 - *Arsenic and Old Lace* by Joseph Kesselring (annotated)
- 5.03 - *The Bed Before Yesterday* by Ben Travers (annotated)
- 5.04 - *Blithe Spirit* by Noel Coward (annotated).