

# Noela Strange-Mure

*Clarrie Neal*

Noela Strange-Mure's Riverstone story begins in the 1920s when her parents, Charles and Gladys decided to leave the city life of Randwick and bought five acres of land in Piccadilly Street, opposite Park Street. Charles, who had been an Alderman on Randwick Council and was a Gallipoli veteran, wanted the land for his hobby of gardening.

Charles then built his own home and it was here that they reared their three daughters - Betty, Dorothy and Noela. Gladys was a music teacher who encouraged her three daughters to learn singing and music from an early age but Noela was the only one to make it a full time career. Noela said her mother had a beautiful singing voice and was an excellent pianist. She also said both her older sisters had beautiful singing voices and would have had successful careers had they not opted for marriage.

All three girls attended Riverstone Public School, and Noela has many happy memories of her childhood days - the vigoro games on the grounds opposite the school, the air raid shelters in the school grounds and the drills, her sister Betty serving in the Women's Land Army during the War, her father building their tennis court, then building their own air raid shelter just behind the court. Noela regarded herself as a tomboy, often ignoring the dolls in the pram, preferring to fire stones from her catapult or swing from the rope on a tree on a nearby creek.

She recalled the time her mother, walking through the paddocks to Martin's dairy, was chased by a bull, and diving through a barbed wire fence to escape, she badly gashed both legs. These wounds developed into ulcers and she had many visits to Windsor Hospital, eventually having to travel to Sydney Hospital for specialist treatment. Aub Gillespie, the taxi proprietor would take her to Sydney, wait nearby while she received her treatment, then would take her for a tour of different scenic parts of Sydney to cheer her up, before returning to Riverstone.

After his return from the First World War her father felt that people should know more about the effects of war so he spent many hours writing a book he titled 'Diggers Daily Doings'. Noela does not know what happened to the book, and she doubts that it was ever published. Charles was a keen gardener and a handyman who built the pulpit at St. Paul's Church in Elizabeth Street.

Noela's secondary schooling was three years at Parramatta High School, followed by five years at the Conservatorium of Music studying singing and learning the piano. Her first job was three months in the Packing Room at Riverstone Meatworks before going to David Jones where she learnt Commercial Art.

It was at David Jones she became the leading soloist with their choir, under the guidance of Linley Evans. She was a regular entrant in the Sun Aria contests held in the 1950s and '60s.

She recalled the long days when studying at the Conservatorium, catching the 5.40am steam train and not getting home until 10pm or sometimes later. She recalled the cold frosty mornings, riding her bike to the station, often arriving at the same time as the train, with the station master saying "just get on the train, Noela, I will park your bike". He would park her bike in the passage way of the Post Office and Parcels Office, along with all the other commuter's bikes.

With no television, our entertainment was from the radio stations. A popular show at the time was a talent quest known as the Amateur Hour, hosted by Dick Fair. Noela entered this quest and won, largely due to efforts of her former teacher Mrs McCormack who solicited many votes through the Riverstone school, and a friend Mavis Wilson, who did the same at her workplace, David Jones.

As a young girl Noela would often ride her bike out to Rouse Hill house to sit and talk and sometimes sing with Nina Terry; she has fond memories of those days. Noela is mentioned in the book 'Rouse Hill House' singing at Bobbie Terry's wedding reception held at Rouse Hill house in 1949. While studying music, Noela gained a lot of experience singing at weddings and concerts in the district. Some of the weddings in Riverstone she recalled were Judith and Kevin Lewis, Winsome and Eddie Phillis, Joyce and Glen Wood, Fay and Eric Brookes, Max and Fay Strachan, and she has many memories of the various concerts held at the time.

When Noela found travelling from Riverstone was taking too much of her time, she decided to get a unit in the inner city. Completing her studies, her first position was with the Arts Council, recalling that one of their Australia wide tours of country towns involved travelling some 12,000 miles in four months. Her next position was four years with the Repertory Opera Company, followed by 15 years with Opera Australia. Each year these groups spent up to six months on the road.

This article appeared in the *Telegraph* in 1956, under the heading - '*Spotlight for Noela*'  
*Every understudy prays for the chance to make the big time - and on Thursday night petite Sydney soprano Noela Strange-Mure took hers with both hands. Only the night before the Australian Opera Company's final performance of Puccini's 'Turandot', Noela learnt that Morag Beaton, who sings the title role in the opera had taken ill and she would have to stand in for her. A very nervous Noela went on - and wowed 'em. "Noela was fantastic" the Company's manager (Mr Doug Abbott) said last night. "I was a bit edgy about how she'd go. It's a terrifically demanding opera - only the very best of sopranos would dare tackle it."*

Mr Abbott needn't have worried. Noela sang, and the audience cheered. Noela, 26, had been biding her time for the past six months singing in the opera's chorus.

Explaining her sudden success she said: "If it hadn't been for Morag's reaction to antibiotics I may never have got my chance. She developed a throat and chest infection a few days ago and instead of getting better, her face and throat became swollen and broke out in a rash." Just to show there were no hard feelings, Morag sent her understudy two sheaves of flowers.

The records show she has performed with the best, has met many famous people, including the Queen, and is recognised as one of our leading sopranos.

Her favourite memories include appearing-

- with Dame Joan Sutherland in 'Tales of Hoffmann'
- with Joan Bronhill in 'Don Pasquale'
- as Princess Turindot in 'Turindot'
- in the starring role of 'Fenena' in 'Nabucca'
- playing the lead role of 'Sister Angelica' at the opening of the Sydney Opera House
- appearing in many Operas at Sydney Opera House
- in many productions of Gilbert and Sullivan, including, 'Iolanthe' and 'Pirates of Penzance'
- in 'Tanhauser'

- 'The Sound Of Music' at the Tivoli.
- playing the role of 'Dame Nellie Melba'.
- meeting the Queen twice.

Performances with Opera Australia include leading soprano roles in - Soeur Angelica (Sister Angelica);- Nabucco (Fenena); - Cosi Fan Tutti (Fiordiligi). Leading soprano roles in other opera companies' productions of Madam Butterfly; Faust; Pagliacci; Cavalleria Rusticana; Force of Destiny; Nabucco and The Flying Dutchman.

Noela has appeared in most of the older theatres in Sydney - the Capitol, Her Majesty's, the Elizabethan Theatre in Newtown, the Tivoli and the Empire. She recalled the evening she travelled into Sydney for a performance at the Empire, only to find it had been burnt to the ground that afternoon.

The first time she met the Queen was after a performance of an Opera Australia production, a formal affair, the second time was in more unusual circumstances.

One morning as she was getting out of bed, listening to Alan Jones on 2UE, she realised she knew the answer to a quiz question being asked. She phoned the station, was put on hold, and in discussion with the receptionist was asked did she sing, to which she answered "Yes". She was asked to sing 'God Save The Queen' and when finished was surprised to be told by Alan Jones she had won. Somewhat confused by the sequence of events, she tried to explain she had not entered, and was even more confused when told she had been chosen to present a bouquet of flowers to the Queen at a function at the Convention Centre at Darling Harbour.

Another special memory is when she was asked to sing 'Beyond the Sunset' at the memorial service held for Police Commissioner Mackay.

Noela expresses gratitude to the many people who have encouraged her during her career. Her teacher George McNeilly, who had learnt from Dame Nellie Melba's teacher; Mr W. Ferguson from Riverstone who organised a concert at the Sydney Town Hall that gave her the opportunity to appear with Dame Joan Sutherland and June Bronhill. Roy Watterson with his wonderful melodious tenor voice who has appeared in many duets with Noela at the Welsh Society functions. Roy has been the President of the Welsh Society for many years and is currently the producer of the 'Good Old Days' concerts at the Sydney Town Hall.

She demonstrated she still has a magnificent voice when singing 'Climb Every Mountain', playing the role of Mother Abbess in the 'Sound Of Music', held at Castle Hill and several other Sydney venues in July 2002.

Noela continues to maintain the high quality of her artistic work which has distinguished her singing career since its inception and has given pleasure to so many.

*Compiled by Clarrie Neal from information provided by Noela Strange-Mure, September 2002.*