

Doing the time warp (again)

Forty years ago, *The Rocky Horror Show* was launched on an unsuspecting Australian public. *Sal Sharah*, who played Riff Raff, looks back on the Rocky rollercoaster

I was performing in *Godspell* at Sydney's Richbrook Theatre in the early 70s when my agent suggested I should audition for a new musical. It was the first I'd heard of *The Rocky Horror Show*.

My agent called soon after the audition to say the director, Jim Sharman, was interested in me for the part of Riff Raff – if Garry McDonald couldn't do it. Thankfully, Garry chose to do *Wollongong the Brave* on television, which led to *The Norman Gunston Show*, and I got to play Riff Raff.

I remember going to the first day of rehearsals, held in a studio at the old Elizabethan Theatre Trust in Kings Cross. I had no idea what the show was about or who was in it, I was just happy to be doing another show. I'd managed to get hold of an album of the English production, which had opened the year before, but there were no images and the music, though interesting, didn't help much.

There was no big buzz about it being the next big show as there had been with *Godspell*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* or *Hair*. But looking around the room was incredibly reassuring. Harry M. Miller was producing it, Jim was the director of moment and Reg Livermore (Frank 'N' Furter) was already a star. The three of them had worked together on *Hair* and *Superstar*. Then there were established actors like Kate



Sal Sharah, as a hirsute Riff Raff in the first Australian stage production, and today

Fitzpatrick (Magenta), Jane Harders (Janet), David Cameron (Eddie and Dr Scott) and Arthur Dignam (Narrator) and others I didn't know: Maureen Elkner (Columbia), John Paramor (Brad) and Graham "Fluffy" Matters (Rocky). I was a little intimidated but there was all this beautiful warmth and support coming from the cast and I started to find my character.

When I did get to see a photo of Richard O'Brien, who played Riff Raff in London, he was balding with this long, straggly hair and here I was with this afro. So I was a bit bemused about why I was cast but in fact we all had a very different look to the English cast.

Jim, who had directed *Rocky* in London, didn't give a lot of grand directions; he'd just walk

around with a knowing smile on his face having quiet little chats with each of the actors. We would then do the scene again and things would start to happen.

Watching Reg find his way into the character of Frank 'N' Furter was fascinating. Jim gave him more and more freedom and encouragement to let the character go where he wanted. I remember Reg starting to channel Bette Davis in rehearsals one day and suddenly it took on a whole other dimension. We were all gobsmacked, thinking, "Wow! What was that?" I guess that was the key to Reg's Frank 'N' Furter. He then developed the character in the most magnificent way. He was really quite scary at times and so unpredictable – not just for the



Clockwise from above: director Jim Sharman with Richard O'Brien, who played Riff Raff in the original London musical; the famously unpredictable Reg Livermore as Frank 'N' Furter; and Kate Fitzpatrick as Magenta

audience but for the cast. We had no idea what he was doing some nights. It was exciting!

The production premiered in Sydney in April 1974, opening at midnight at the New Arts Cinema, a former picture theatre in Glebe. It had scaffolding everywhere with demolition signs. I remember thinking the theatre wasn't ready but of course that's the way it was, and the way it stayed for the whole season. It created the perfect ghoulish setting for the show.

The opening night got a stunning response but about three to four weeks into the season, houses started to drop off a little. We certainly had the gay audience and fans of Reg's but we weren't getting the broader public at first. I think they were confused about what it was.

One night we obviously hadn't given one of our better performances; Harry had a chat to us afterwards and basically told us to keep believing in the show as he did and it would be a success. He said he never wanted to see a performance like that again, with us performing like a bunch of monkeys running around on stage, and that if he wanted monkeys he'd pay peanuts. David Cameron said: "You are paying peanuts, Harry." David chose to leave the show not long after and was replaced by Terry Bader.

That night was a bit of a turning point because eventually people started to come, not just once but again and again. Halfway through the season we felt like rock stars. Each of the characters had fans who would wait to see us

after the show, seeking autographs and to give us gifts. We were invited to a lot of parties and openings. It was a great time to be in "the" show of the moment.

Reg had this beautiful freedom to take Frank anywhere he wanted and still make it believable. There were times when if somebody had laughed inappropriately, he'd run down into the audience, shuffle along the row – this grotesque character in fishnets and suspenders with that crazy make-up – and shake them in their seat. Then he'd strut back on stage and say, "Well, I shook the shit out of him," and the audience would roar with laughter.

One of the things I valued most from *Rocky* was the friendship I developed with Reg both on and off stage. It was almost like a love-hate thing between Frank 'N' Furter and Riff Raff. He needed Riff Raff and confided in him but Riff Raff was also his whipping boy, literally. Reg used to pull out this whip and crack it across the stage at me. Sometimes he'd get a little carried away and one night it went crack across my right hand. I've still got the scar. The next thing I could see blood trickling through the fishnet gloves. Reg was just mortified when he saw that – and comforted me, as Frank.

We developed this poignant moment on stage together when things started to go wrong for Frank – Rocky had run off and had sex with Janet and he'd had to kill Eddie – where he'd come and lay his hand on my hump and one night I pulled out a rose and presented it to him.

At the start of the season the show ran about 90 minutes, but by Reg's last performance it was close to two hours because he kept finding new moments. I'll never forget his last night. In the middle of the song *Don't Dream It*, he grabbed a glass of champagne and then started singing Peggy Lee's *Is That All There Is?* It was such a moment.

I was devastated when Reg left the show but I went on to do it in Melbourne with Max Phipps, who was another amazing Frank 'N' Furter. Later I did the show in New Zealand with Gary Glitter.

It's the Frank 'N' Furter who really defines a production of *Rocky Horror*. It's such a gift of a role for the right performer. But nothing in my career compares to that first Sydney season. There was something very organic and special about the original cast. Even Jim Sharman has said that of all the productions, this was his favourite company.

A 40th anniversary production of *The Rocky Horror Show* opens in Brisbane in January and tours to Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne.