



Lunch
with
Leo
Schofield

Betty's back

A legendary show that became part of Australian folklore has been reimagined for a new Sydney Festival audience

Look out, here's she comes again. It's BETTY BLOKK-BUSTER!!!! Betty who?

Readers over 50 will know precisely who Betty was, may even have seen her in action on the stage of the somewhat seedy Balmain Bijou during her eight-month occupancy there in 1975 when she became part of Australian theatrical folklore, or during lengthy stints in other capitals.

Now it's the turn of younger audiences to discover this legendary creation, risen from theatrical slumber, reincarnated and all set to wreak anarchic havoc in the Spiegeltent during next year's Sydney Festival.

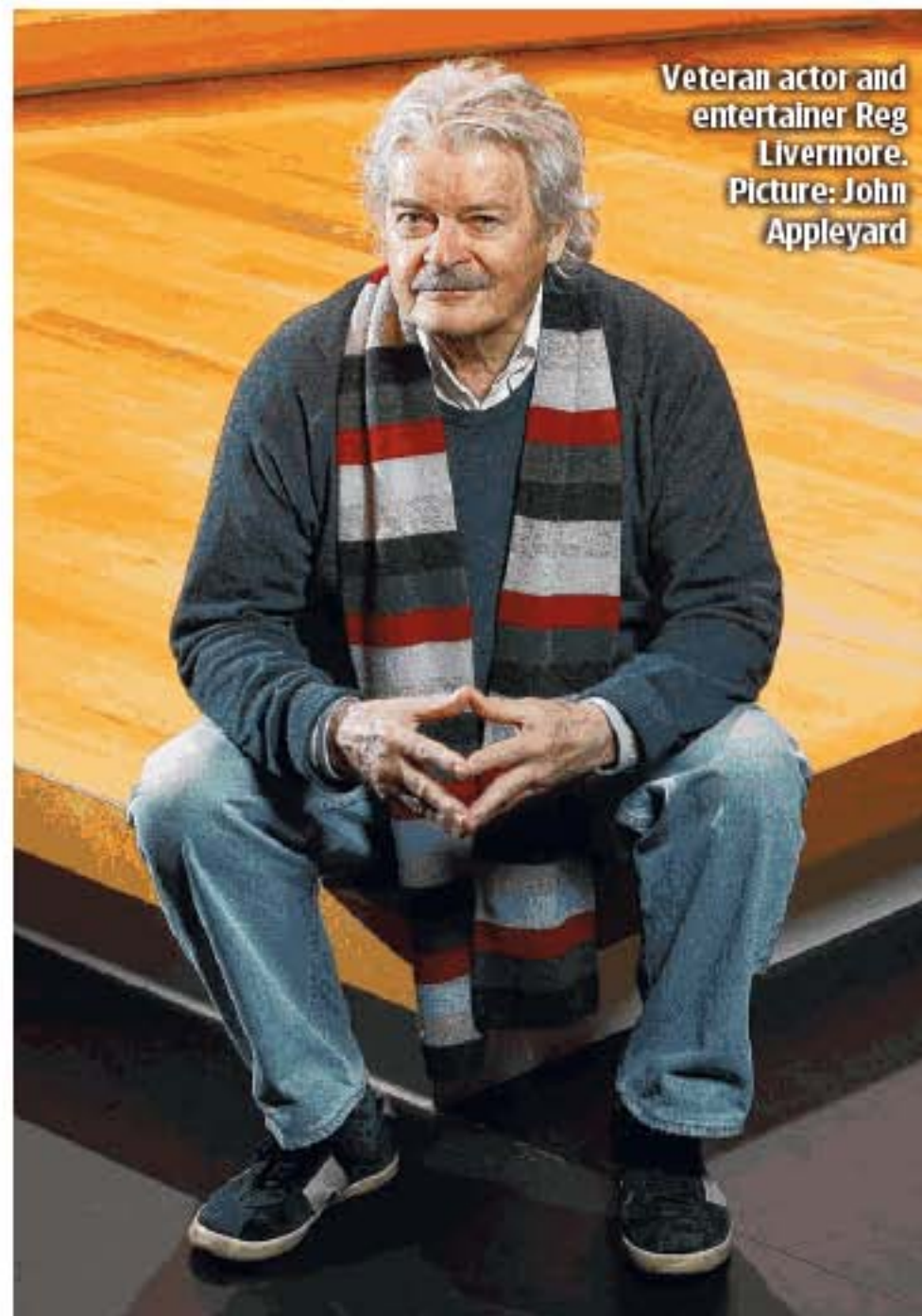
Ladies and gentlemen, may I present my luncheon guests, Betty One and Betty Two.

On my right, the original Betty, octogenarian Aussie theatre legend, all-singing, all-dancing Reg Livermore, who's played in more shows than can be reckoned, from the Duke of Plaza Toro in the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *The Gondoliers* to the Wizard of Oz in *Wicked*, and on my left, Betty Mark II, the exhilarating multi-talented actor Josh Quong Tart.

The show is billed as Betty

Blokk-Buster "Reimagined".

To get a whiff of what's being reimagined, travel with me back almost half a century to Betty's first appearance before a Sydney public in the Betty Blokk-Buster Follies. Imagine you're in that now-vanished former cinema in Sydney's inner west. The lights dim, the curtains part to reveal the most minimal of sets — a black box, a circus ring defined by red lights on stage, festoons of red lights above. Into a single Kleig-strength spotlight springs Livermore, pale as a white marble tombstone, wearing high heels, an outsize white mob cap and a frilly white apron. Ghostly white make-up suggests a collision between kabuki and Weimar cabaret. Eyes are lozenges rimmed with lashings of black kohl, the brows a circumflex formed by two slender inward slanting lines of black pencil. Betty greets the audience in faux-German, then turns around to reveal a bare backside topped with a



Veteran actor and
entertainer Reg
Livermore.
Picture: John
Appleyard

bow, a fetishist's dream of that stereotypical sex object, the saucy parlour maid. Producing a giant feather duster she lightly dusts her buns with talc and the show is under way.

This startling intro may or may not be retained in the new version, currently in rehearsal at the Old Fitz Theatre, that dynamic little 60-seat performance space incorporated into the historic Old Fitzroy Hotel, a 160-year-old Woolloomooloo landmark.

We are lunching, natch, at that very hotel where another resurrection is taking place.

Nicholas Hill, former sous chef of the much-garlanded Sepia restaurant, is now installed and punching out what may well be the tastiest pub tucker in town.

The notion of reimagining (it's his word!) Betty's follies came to Andrew Henry as 'twere in a dream.

Henry, artistic director of Redline Productions which runs the Old Fitz Theatre and one of the liveliest performing arts personages in town, is too young to have seen the show in its original incarnation but he had, of course, heard of it and, indeed, recalls watching it on the tube when he was seven or eight. He's wanted to stage it ever since, so, with due deference, he approached Livermore to seek blessing and imprimatur, both readily forthcoming.

Acknowledging the timing of the original, Livermore remembers the impact the original had.

"We never intended to shock but Betty came along in the wake of the *Rocky Horror Show*," he says. That

particular phenomenon, first as a stage show, then a movie, seemed to encapsulate the Zeitgeist.

"We were saying what people were thinking at the time. But they hadn't yet found the courage or the platform or the technology to enable them to say it for themselves."

Quong Tart picks up on that thought. "That was 1975. The year I was born. Rather cool coincidence don't you think? We are now in a new world where everyone is saying whatever they think. They're saying a lot



We are now in a new world where everyone is saying whatever they think

on social media. Maybe too much. And doing weird things."

Livermore, who participated in the original discussion on the shape of the revival — oops, sorry, reimagined show — doesn't sit in on rehearsals like a spectre at the feast, but is available if Henry or director Craig Iott need to float an idea. Or if Quong Tart, great grandson of the fabled Sydney merchant and philanthropist Quong Tart, needs to chat.

Born in Guangdong, Quong Tart's distinguished ancestor was the first Asian to be accepted into society in



19th-century Sydney, perhaps in all of Australia. He became rich, opened emporia selling Chinese goods and hung his name proudly in large gilded characters on the shingle outside his eponymous tea rooms in the Queen Victoria Building.

Today's most famous bearer of the Quong Tart surname is a graduate of NIDA. His CV may not be quite so lengthy as Livermore's but it's equally varied. And there's still time. Already he's starred in umpteen TV series, including *Home And Away* and *Underbelly*, in musicals (as Scar in

The Lion King), on stage and on film. The biggest challenge he's currently facing is performing as Betty in high heels. To become accustomed to the feel of a heel, he's had made a pair of nifty boots with Cuban lifts. He's wearing these at rehearsals and at our lunch.

"I have to get used to these things," he says ruefully, as he lifts a leg to better show off his exotic footwear.

How does Livermore feel about someone half his age stepping into his shoes, so to speak, reimagining his stage persona?

"Delighted," he says.

Above: Leo Schofield lunches with Josh Quong Tart and Reg Livermore at the Old Fitz Hotel. Right: Reg Livermore with Margaret Goldie in the musical *Hair* in 1969.

Far right: Livermore as Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Show* in 1975.



And how does Quong Tart feel about being Betty?

"It's a massive privilege. But it's not as if we're replicating Reg's show. We're inspired by it and by him. And we hope it will be every bit as popular now as then."

Both actors stress "it's not a drag show".

Betty may kick off proceedings in flounces and the near-nuddy (as was the case in the original) and there may be a frock or two later, but the range of characters is as varied as those imagined by the great Barry Humphries.

"It's a satire, a comment

From page 15

on contemporary attitudes and issues," says Quong Tart.

"What about climate change?" I ask.

"We've covered that. Greta (Thunberg) is in it! And there are references to the drought."

Conversation halts temporarily when our scotch eggs arrive. These are scrumptious, crunchy crisp outside with the egg inside perfectly cooked, whites firm, yolks runny.

They are light and warm and come with a homemade piccalilli, a neat take on the 19th-century tradition of dishing it up hot with gravy. Think of them as "reimagined".

There is some discussion of the use of that word and whether it implies a complete makeover?

Given the then-record box-office takings generated by the Sydney triumph and the subsequent national tour, the reimagining and Betty's re-emergence as Wonder Woman in a brand new show along the same

lines, one might expect rigid adherence to a winning formula along Hollywood lines, where success begets multiple sequels.

But the production team, comprising the director Henry and his fellow Red-line director Vanessa Wright, designer Brian Thomson, playwrights Mary Rachel Brown and Louis Nowra, Academy Award-winning costume designer Tim Chappel and the solo performer, is not content to go with minimal modifications.

"We have lots of new material already," says Quong Tart, "and some terrific new songs."

"Now all we need to do is keep focusing on all the stuff we have, shake it down, figure out the contents of each half and establish a new running order."

I ask Quong Tart how many shows are scheduled for January.

"Eighteen."

Livermore, the veteran of hundreds more, fixes him with a wicked smile and raised eyebrows.

"Only 18?" he says.



Lunch at The Old Fitzroy

- Scotch egg
- Schnitzel, chats, gem lettuce and chicken gravy (above)
- Cauliflower cheese tart with oak lettuce
- Olive oil ice-cream with warm jam toast

Josh Quong Tart (wearing his high heels) and Reg Livermore on the steps of the Old Fitzroy Hotel in Woolloomooloo.