

The theatre's ageless nightingale

At the age of 87, Colleen Clifford is directing a full-scale production of *Hamlet* and is opening in her one-woman show, *A Nightingale Still Sings in Berkeley Square*. She talks with BERWYN LEWIS about her many remarkable years in the theatre.

COLLEEN Clifford, actress, singer, director, pianist and teacher of voice production, still knows how to steal a scene or two.

Born in 1898, Colleen Clifford's professional career began when she was 20.

"The family didn't speak to me for a fortnight when I told them I was working in the theatre. They thought I'd disgraced them, but after a performance they'd come up to me and say: 'That wasn't bad old girl!'"

"My mother always encouraged me to have the best dancing, fencing and singing lessons but she never intended me to become a professional. We all used to gather around the piano at home and sing all the numbers from the musicals," Clifford recalls.

At her remarkable age, a lifetime of services to the arts behind her, she is still a full-time professional, frequently putting in a 14-hour day, seven days a week.

This week in her Sydney inner-city apartment, crowded with memorabilia, bouquets thrust into an assortment of vases, books, scripts, programs, handbills, chocolate and nail polish scattered on her coffee table, she was recovering from a surprise party and making plans for her production of *Hamlet* which will open in Sydney on September 2 at the Bay Street Theatre, Broadway.

The party celebrated a presentation of her "Dame" Colleen Clifford Album book. It contains letters recommending her for the honour of Dame by Stuart Wagstaff, Edna Edgley (who has worked with her for more than 20 years), Archbishop E.B. Clancy of St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, June Salter ("her services to the arts, long overdue"), Jill Perryman, Kevin Johnson, Nancye Hayes and Harry Bluck.

"Very generous of these children, I think," says Clifford, her delectable eyes beaming with mischief as she conjures up a memory provoked by Harry Bluck.

She recalls attending a funeral for one of the members of the Musicians Union in the days when Bluck used to work with her.

At the time Clifford was directing *Kismet* for the Edgleys at His Majesty's Theatre, Perth. Bluck walked up to her and said: "I can never get away from it. I'm following a hearse at a funeral for one of our oldest colleagues and someone beside me turns to me and says: 'Why aren't I playing in *Kismet*?'"

Clifford claims she has a special reason for directing *Hamlet*. "I'm doing it for my *Hamlet*. He is someone who the late Robin Lovejoy said was the best period actor and the best *Hamlet* in Australia. As I've watched him rehearsing I realise how true this is.

"I trained him when he was 18 and then put him in my first professional company, the Theatre Guild of Perth, which toured Western Australia in a production of *She Stoops To Conquer*. He played Marlow divinely. He has played *Hamlet* three times."

Who is her *Hamlet*?

"He played for the Perth Playhouse and then he came to Sydney and



Colleen Clifford: after a lifetime of service, more 14-hour days. Picture by ALAN PRYKE.

played for The Old Tote for years," says Colleen Clifford, still holding back on her *Hamlet*. "He's since joined the ABC but his heart breaks to be back on the stage."

Who is her *Hamlet*?

"Thank God I'm at one with my *Hamlet*. I'm so tired of gimmicks and reading interpretations which don't exist. I agree with Gielgud, it's the words that count. The voice can make glorious colours and pictures. *Hamlet* expresses the most commonsense and if you follow that the poetry falls into place. You don't have to put on a rah-tee-tah-tee-tah thing," says Clifford.

"The quality of mercy is not strained . . ." She renders this in two different voices. The first is soft, wistful, musical. The second is Strine as she is spoke from the side of certain thespian mouths which Clifford is, naturally, unprepared to divulge.

"Consider this . . ." she continues in melting tones and then proclaims, "Not, **kernsider** this."

"I am very, very, lucky with my cast. *Hamlet* and I hug ourselves every night. He's given me so much help," she adds.

Colleen Clifford continues to spin out the cat-and-mouse game of *Hamlet*. Her sense of timing is impeccable as she touches the string of shell-shaped beads from some "far-flung Polynesian place" which she wears.

The doorbell rings. Enter *Hamlet*. He is Michael Bowie.

There is another doorbell. Enter a voice-training student.

The door bell rings again. Enter yet another student.

Clifford seats her "audience" around her, rescues a hand mirror and a box of tissues from beneath a cushion and continues.

"I have to apologise for the untidy room. It's more of an office at the moment," she says, launching into a de-

scription of her forthcoming one-woman show, *A Nightingale Still Sings in Berkeley Square*, which opens on November 7 at the Bondi Pavilion.

For this former royal command performer at the London Coliseum and the London Palladium, the Bondi Pavilion presents an opportunity to "stick in a reference about its location on the spur of the moment".

"I do a lot of things on the spur of the moment," sighs Colleen Clifford. She intends to do her mad pianist act at the end, playing the Liszt Rhapsody. She is also an accomplished pianist.

Talent and technique

"I gave my first piano recital at the age of 17 but my sense of humour got the better of me. Instead of being serious I took the mickey out of pianists, operatic singers and French actresses. Eventually I put all this together into a kind of potpourri of my life on the stage, mostly in the West End of London, Shakespeare, musical comedy, drama, review, television and radio.

Between 1924 and 1953, Clifford held a record for doing more broadcasts than any other woman in England. Her one-woman show, a 15-minute variety act, was broadcast to a different county in England each night.

She remembers the days when telecasts were in black and white from dingy, little studios with fixed cameras which meant performers could not step out of the framed camera angle.

"You ought to have seen them. The press used to come to some of our earliest recordings. We had to wear dead-white Pierrot make-up with a dark line down the nose and dark blue eye brows and lips. They shrank back from us in horror," she laughs.

She is definitely a woman with a past, and when she recalls the names and faces of her colleagues it is a roll call of who's who in English theatre, past and present.

"I saw Mrs Pat Campbell, Henry Ainley, Marie Tempest, Owen Nares, Gerald du Maurier, Gertie Millar, Gertie Lawrence ('I saw her in the original *Private Lives* three times with Noel Coward), Jack Buchanan, Bobby Howes, Cicely Courtneidge, Ivor Novello, Ethel Barrymore (in *The Corn* was Green and the famous Lunts. I knew Coward and Olivier very well."

Her life has been a continuing passionate affair with the theatre.

"I want to do my one-woman show some time before I pop off. I have no plans for that, however. I have to find a theatre first."

She claims she has "loads of boyfriends" but would never consider re-marrying. She was once married to Douglas Blackford, Director of Security of the British Air Ministry and Air Attache from 1943 to 1945 to the British Embassy in Washington. Donald McLean was First Secretary to the British Embassy at that time.

"A more charming young man you could not have met. Delightful. No one would have dreamt he was a Soviet spy. As First Secretary he was privy to all the war secrets and he was passing them over."

She feels "ashamed" to admit she has no regrets at not having children.

"I love children but where would I be now if I had clinging babies?" she asks.

She believes Australia lacks technique but not talent.

"I think the talent in Australia fantastic but there are very few good directors. There are young men, a one or two women, with no basic techniques and masses of ideas. They on their backs and throw beans and balloons at each other to relax."

"Just recently, a director told me younger member of his cast ask 'When we come to rehearsals, shall bring balloons?'"

"The director asked, 'What on earth would you want to do that for?'"

"Well, we blow them up then throw them to each other and that relaxes us," said the young actor.

"Oh, I think we'll just start with the play," said the director."

"It grieves me when I see these 'bc actors' who have no basic technique or control. They can't use their voice. They don't know how to move. They don't know how to make gesture she says.

"I say to students: 'When you get part, study what you're going to do with that speech. See where your voice is going to rise and where it will drop. See how you will increase the pace. Then draw the cap of the part right over your head and you can't be wrong because you know what you're going to do. You are the part. You are not having a great emotional, inward cloudburst. On the stage is a means of communication. The dramatist has written those words and the actor there to communicate them."

"When I feel the audience is no longer enjoying me, when I don't get a standing ovation for my one-woman show, I'm retiring," says Clifford.

"I think the audience like me because I'm dotty and I'm serious. I make them laugh and I make them cry," she says, turning toward the waiting audience of Michael "Hamlet" Bowie and her two voice students.