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LOVING THIS STAGE OF LIFE

Robyn Nevin can still remember stepping on to the stage at Hobart's Theatre Royal, playing the lead role of Snow White in a school production when she was about 11 or 12.

She'd only recently moved to Hobart with her family, after being born and raised in Melbourne. But after relocating to Tasmania – where she would spend her formative years – and settling into the family's new home in Lower Sandy Bay, Nevin started at nearby Fahan School. And it was here she set upon a path that would ultimately lead her to become an Australian theatre icon, with an illustrious career spanning several decades.

Miss Audrey Morphett was one of the school's founding principals, and used to write and direct the school play each year. And Morphett saw something special in Nevin, casting her in the lead role.

Nevin was grateful for the opportunity – she took acting quite seriously, even at such a tender age – and was determined to do her very best in her theatre debut.

But she could never have imagined that the role would be the start of a lifelong passion for performing and the catalyst for pursuing a hugely successful career as an actor, director and stage producer.

Now 81, Nevin is a recognisable face in Australia and overseas, having performed in a huge number of movies, TV shows and theatre productions since graduating from the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) in 1960.

Some may remember Nevin's early career, when she had a variety of roles in radio and television, working mainly for the ABC, in current affairs, music and children's programs. Later highlights included 80s miniseries *Water Under the Bridge* and drama series *The Sullivans*, appearances on crime dramas like *Matlock Police* and *Halifax FP*, and Nevin is also widely known for her role of Margaret Denyar (Nanny Margaret) in 24 episodes of comedy series *Upper Middle Bogan* between 2013-2016, as well as mystery drama *Top of the Lake*.

Meanwhile film credits include hit Aussie

Australian icon of the stage and screen, Robyn Nevin, credits her formative years in Hobart for propelling her towards a long and illustrious career in performing arts. And now, as Nevin prepares to return to Hobart's Theatre Royal – where her love of theatre began – to direct *The Mousetrap*, she says it's a joy to be bringing the thrilling production to a place so close to her heart

Words LINDA SMITH
Main portrait HUGH STEWART

film *The Castle* (1997), *The Matrix Reloaded* and *The Matrix Revolutions* (both 2003), *Ruben Guthrie* (2015), horror film *Relic* (2020), and last year's film *The Appleton Ladies' Potato Race*.

The former artistic director of both the Queensland Theatre Company and the Sydney Theatre Company, Nevin has directed more than 30 productions and has acted in more than 80 plays, collaborating with internationally-renowned artists, including Richard Wherrett, Simon Phillips, Geoffrey Rush, Julie Andrews, Aubrey Mellor, Jennifer Flowers, Cate Blanchett and Lee Lewis.

She has worked in London's West End and in the US and has played leading roles in Australia's major theatre companies including the great classical roles for women in *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, *The Merchant Of Venice*, *The Seagull*, *The Way Of The World*, *Cyrano De Bergerac*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and *The Cherry Orchard*, and has also taken on the traditionally-male roles of Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar*, and the Fool in *King Lear*.

Hailed as "the First Lady of the Australian theatre", Nevin has won countless awards, including multiple Logies and multiple

Helpmann, Green Room and Sydney Theatre awards. Nevin was also made a member of the Order of Australia for her outstanding contributions to Australia's performing arts and her role in mentoring others. And she has an honorary doctorate from the University of Tasmania.

Now, Nevin is preparing to return to Hobart's Theatre Royal, where her love for theatre began, to direct a production of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*.

The genre-defining murder mystery from the best-selling novelist of all time is also the world's longest running play, having enthralled audiences since opening in London's West End in 1952.

After a sold-out capital city tour in Australia in 2022-23 to celebrate the show's 70th birthday, *The Mousetrap* is embarking on a further tour across Australia in 2024, with shows in Newcastle, Gold Coast, Hobart, Orange, Geelong, Darwin, Port Macquarie, Toowoomba, Frankston, Albury, Northern Beaches, Mackay and Wollongong.

The popular murder mystery is set in London, where seven strangers find themselves snowed in at a remote country guesthouse. When a police sergeant arrives, the guests discover – to their horror – that a killer is in their midst. One by one, the suspicious characters reveal their sordid pasts, leaving audiences scrambling to work out which one is the murderer and who their next victim will be as they try to solve the world-famous mystery.

The play has a twist at the end, which audiences are traditionally asked not to reveal after leaving the theatre.

Christie originally wrote the story as a short radio play entitled *Three Blind Mice*, which was broadcast in 1947 as a birthday present for Queen Mary. She eventually adapted the work into a short story before again rewriting it for the stage as *The Mousetrap*. Ironically, Christie did not expect the play to run for more than a few months and stipulated that no film of *The Mousetrap* be made until at least six months



Robyn Nevin, left, who will be directing *The Mousetrap*, the world's longest running play, at Hobart's Theatre Royal in June; and Nevin, above, earlier in her acting career.



after the West End Production closed.

For this year's Australian tour, Nevin directs a cast featuring Hannah Fredericksen as Mollie Ralston, Alex Rathgeber as Giles Ralston, Geraldine Turner as Mrs Boyle, Chris Parker as Major Metcalf, Miranda Daughtry as Miss Casewell, Gerry Connolly as Mr Paravicini and Timothy Walker as Detective Sergeant Trotter.

Nevin, who also directed the show on its previous Australian tour, is thrilled to be stepping into the role again.

She says the show was such a "phenomenal success" when it toured Australia previously that it was decided to create another production for "all the people who didn't get to see it the first time".

"There's a huge amount of excitement around it," Nevin says.

It will be a busy time for Nevin, who will take a short break from her role as Madame Morrible in the hit stage show of WICKED in Melbourne to bring the show to Hobart.

She enjoys the different disciplines of acting and directing, saying that each brings their own set of challenges, their own level of responsibility – and their own level of exhaustion.

"I enjoy both for different reasons ... I'm fortunate I can do both," she says.

Nevin is looking forward to bringing The Mousetrap to Hobart, to a city – and a historic theatre – that is close to her heart.

"It's a joy," she says of bringing the show to Hobart.

"It's a very special theatre, it's extremely

Robyn Nevin in 2013, surrounded by Grade 5 pupils at The Fahan School, in Sandy Bay, when the actor returned to deliver a keynote speech at the school, which she credits for nurturing her career. Picture: Luke Bowden

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beautiful and has the most wonderful intimacy."

She adores the ornate detailing and deep red velvet seats of the theatre, which opened in 1837 and is Australia's oldest working theatre. She loves the way it "reeks of history".

Nevin is also a fan of the "wonderful" acoustics, and says Tasmania is fortunate to have retained such a beautiful theatre when so many old theatres in other places have been lost.

"It's a thrill to be coming back because I've always felt very strongly about preserving that theatre," Nevin says.

"It's very precious. And Tasmania is very, very lucky to have it – they've been pulled down (almost) everywhere else."

Nevin, who lives on a 4ha property in the NSW southern highlands, has a sister who lives in Hobart so she tries to visit the state at least every couple of years, but sometimes more often.

She also has a number of mainland friends who have made a sea change or a tree change to Tasmania and own property here now.

"I love to visit," Nevin says.

She has "very fond memories" of Tasmania from her childhood, which began long before she moved here.

"I lived in Melbourne but every Christmas as a family my parents would take us across (to Tasmania) to have summer holidays at Opossum Bay," Nevin recalls.

"That was when I was tiny, and we'd do that every year, we stayed in the same shack every single year. And I remember it so well, those

idyllic days in the water ... it was just beautiful."

It was the 1940s, so the seaside town was a little different than it is today.

"Every morning I used to have to walk up the cliff to a little store where the milk had been delivered, and take a billy and get fresh milk," Nevin recalls.

Nevin lived in Sandy Bay between the ages of 11 and 17, which she describes as "very formative years".

She says images of the River Derwent remain forever etched in her mind, and she particularly enjoys seeing artworks from late Australian landscape painter Lloyd Rees, who lived not far from her Sandy Bay home, as the view he often painted was very similar to the view she enjoyed from her own home.

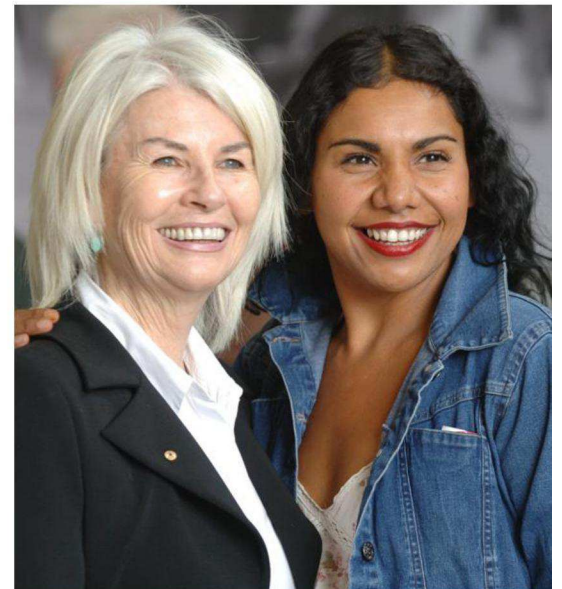
Nevin remembers being in the school choir at Fahan, alongside a fellow student called Judith – that "sweet girl" went on to become Judith Durham, best known as the lead singer of The Seekers, who sadly died in 2022 at age 79.

"We both went on to have substantial careers in the arts," Nevin says.

"But I think it's ironic that we sat next to each other in the choir – she turned out to be a great singer, and I've barely sung a note since."

Nevin quips that "nobody could be more surprised than I am" to find herself currently working in the world of musical theatre, on a large-scale production like WICKED. But she says despite the surprise, it's "quite a wonderful thing to have happened".

Nevin credits her success to Miss Morphett, the Fahan headmistress with a love of the arts,



who nurtured some sort of “innate” acting ability within Nevin.

“I loved the school, the school gave me a career,” Nevin says.

“I still remember the day in assembly when a dark green NIDA prospectus was held up by either Miss Morphett or Miss (Isobel) Travers (the school’s other founder). They said ‘if anyone is interested in applying to go to this drama school, please come and see me’. I got a copy of that prospectus, and I carried it around for months until I did the audition – I did it on the stage at the Theatre Royal and I got in.”

In 1959 she was accepted as part of the first intake of students at the newly established performing arts school – she was 16 when she auditioned and had just turned 17 when she left Tasmania bound for Sydney to start her studies.

“While I left school early, it was with the blessing of Miss Morphett and Miss Travers,” Nevin says.

“It was the right decision – I have no regrets. The influence of that woman on me, Miss Morphett, was quite profound. She instilled in me a belief, a very profound understanding, that whatever I did, I had to do it at a high level, that I had to take it very seriously and I had to do it very well. That was something I carried with me. I was always very serious about my craft, possibly even earnest. I was not the immediate image of a young actress ... I was very serious. I was always just wanting to improve and be better.”

Being an actor wasn’t a career path many people followed back in those days. There was no internet, or social media, or streaming services. Travel was also far more difficult, and far more expensive.

While many people pursue an acting career now because they long to be famous, fame was the furthest thing from Nevin’s mind when she headed to NIDA.

“I wasn’t thinking in terms of a career path, I didn’t think in a pragmatic way, I just had an inner conviction that this was what I could – and would – do,” she says.

“I think that it’s a time now when a lot of people decide they want to be actors for different reasons. Some just want to be famous. I had no such thoughts, I wasn’t interested in that at all. I just knew (acting) was something I could do, and the opportunity was there.”

She believes comprehensive training in



From top: Robyn Nevin, with her WICKED cast members; Nevin with Deborah Mailman at the 2006 Sydney Theatre Company launch; and Nevin, above and right, as Nanny Margaret in Upper Middle Bogan. Pictures: Jim Trifyllis, Hugh Stewart and Supplied by the ABC.

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theatre early in her career has been one of the keys to her success as an actor, as that training provided fundamental skills that could be adapted for other areas, like film and television.

She feels lucky to have found a career she finds so fulfilling, but is quick to point out there’s a lot more to it than luck, with a lot of hard work and dedication to her craft over the years.

Nevin is also very careful when it comes to taking good care of her health, to ensure she can continue to perform at a high level.

“Otherwise, at 81, I wouldn’t be doing so well,” she says.

She discovered the “marvellous” Feldenkrais method of physical therapy many years ago, after using it to successfully treat a shoulder injury, and has continued with it ever since.

From her WICKED dressing room to the stage, there are a number of stairs she is constantly walking up and down, which is quite the workout.

“You do have to keep fit, I’m very serious about that,” Nevin says.

“All you’ve got is your body. You’ve got to be in readiness ... health is terribly important.”

WICKED was previously showing in Sydney, but the Melbourne season recently kicked off.

Nevin describes it as a “marvellous” production to be part of and enjoys the fact that a huge number of Tasmanians travel interstate to see the show.

Nevin performs alongside fellow Tasmanian Shewit Belay, who plays the role of Nessarose.

Belay, 26, speaks highly of Nevin. And Nevin

is equally as impressed with Belay and the rest of the WICKED cast, adding that it’s very much a “mutual appreciation society”.

Despite the impressive list of credits to her name, the acting veteran says she is not one to focus too much on her achievements.

“I don’t spend much time thinking about them, to be honest,” Nevin says.

“Except it means that at my great age I

have got a lot of stories to tell. In the company of WICKED I’m surrounded by young people who are very interested in stories about various aspects of my life and career. I find myself as the kind of elder in the company, and I’m enjoying telling them things that crop up in conversation. I think it’s important for young people in a profession to have elders around, so that they have some kind of understanding of where they’ve come from.”

Despite the many changes to the profession over the years – and the varied roles Nevin has played – Nevin says the driving force for her now is still the same as it was all those years ago when she was a young girl performing on stage at Hobart’s Theatre Royal.

“It requires use of the imagination, and I think that’s what appeals to me,” Nevin says.

“The process of creating a play requires active brain work and you have to access your imagination and emotions and have to develop technique that enables you to contain that emotion. It was the same thing then (in school productions) as now. I was completely engaged imaginatively, I loved that process of having to access another world through your imagination and find a way of inhabiting a character. That’s what I found so intriguing, and it’s still intriguing.”

Agatha Christie’s The Mousetrap, directed by Robyn Nevin, will run from June 11-22 at Hobart’s Theatre Royal. Tickets from \$30 students, \$49 concession, \$59 adults. theatreroyal.com.au