



THE ART OF **CONVERSATION**

When five fabulous women from various areas of the arts in Australia got together for a long lunch, the chatter was endless.

INTERVIEW **RENAE LEITH-MANOS** PHOTOGRAPHY **STEVEN MURRAY**
LOCATION **CATALINA RESTAURANT, ROSE BAY, SYDNEY**

How do you want to be remembered?
"Just like my mother. She could do
anything." *Jeanne Little*





ALYSSA JANE-COOK

ACTOR

"Standing on that stage, going 'How did I get here?' And then you get into the job of it and it becomes so normal. It's just the natural thing to do."



JEANNE LITTLE

ENTERTAINER

"Funnily enough my career actually took off when I was nine months pregnant!"

Well, it was a great night and the next day his office called and said the BBC would like to fly me over to the UK to be on his [talk] show. I couldn't believe it! I went over and was interviewed, and in the paper the next day it said, "Who and what was that?"

Every job I've done I felt was real. I've never done a job and thought, "Oh my God, I can't believe I got that part." I'm thrilled to be standing here. I feel like I'm going on a journey. When I'm actually on the stage, I just get down to the job. Do you find that?

Alyssa-Jane: Yes. Standing on that stage going, "How did I get here?" And then you get into the job of it and it becomes so normal. It's just the natural thing to do. I love it. Working with Marcus Graham [on the TV series *E Street*] was a highlight for me.

Real Beauty: Was there a trigger – a moment – when you knew you were destined for a career on stage?

Jeanne: Funnily enough my career actually took off when I was nine months pregnant. I was designing clothes and the newspaper needed a story that day and did a little story about my quirky designs. Then *The Mike Walsh Show* was also having a quiet day and called and asked if I'd go on. Can you believe it? John Michael Howson was filling in and, when he saw me, he thought the producers had played a big trick on him and put a drag queen on the show. Truly, he still screams with laughter when he sees me.

Rachael: A friend of my mother's said, "There's nothing else that the girls can do in Ballina, send them to ballet." But I was already singing and dancing, so it was in me. There was no choice for me. Absolutely, that was the way I was destined to go. My father was also a director, and he used to direct a lot of classical plays. We would pull our chairs up the front and climb up on stage. I had very encouraging parents.

At 15 I auditioned for *Cats* and they said, "You're too young to be doing eight shows a week." I said, "We've driven for three hours, can I please audition?" And they said yes. I got into the final five in that audition and they said, "We'll find another young girl for you and we will put two people into the role, and you can start in Sydney."

Cheryl: I always loved song and dance. Just showing off, basically. And the big turning point for me was when I was about six. Everybody went to see *The Sound Of Music* starring Julie Andrews for their birthday parties that year. I used to have this dream she would lose her voice and I would have to get up and sing *Maria*. I eventually performed in a school show with my now husband Peter [Coleman-Wright] – his voice was breaking!

Rachael: You went to the same school?

Cheryl: My parents moved from Melbourne to Geelong when I was 12, and in the following year I auditioned and got into the play [*The Boyfriend*]. I played Maisy and my husband was Bobby. The only reason I got into it was because I heard that there was going to be a camp and you could get out of school work. I hated school. I used to concoct ways to get out of the classroom.

Jeanne: I hated school, too. I thought I was too good for it. I had a repertoire of excuses. I'd get bloody noses and have to go to sick bay... I did everything to get out of school.

Cheryl: At 13 I met Peter, my husband, and started going out with him. It was really weird, because my father had gone to school in Geelong [years before] with Peter's father, and my mother had sat

next to Peter's mother. When I started going out with Peter, they all met up, and they realised they knew each other.

I left school at 17 to work in a bank. The following year I went to college and, in that time, Pete and I broke up. At the college, I just thought this is not what I want to do. Instrumentalists, were analysing symphonies and writing counterpoints I just didn't have a clue about. I wanted to play dress ups and... I just wanted to be Julie Andrews, basically.

Diana: What about the romance?

Cheryl: I'd been overseas, met up with Peter again – he'd already gone to London – we got married and basically we moved to Europe. Then he said 'well we're that poor, you've got to get a job', so I rang up all the opera companies, and the Welsh national opera said 'we've got a vacancy for a chorus.' So I went down to Cardiff, and I auditioned, and they offered me the job. I was in the chorus at the Welsh national opera for a year and a half. Then I was 23.

Diana: Do you think, though, that they start too young now?

Alyssa-Jane: When I consider my daughter Georgia May – she is an incredible vocalist – she's been singing since she was seven. And she loves it.

Jeanne: But, darling, isn't it bad if you push things too early?

Alyssa-Jane: Oh, she already had it. She was already capable tonally.

Diana: I was eight when I first picked up the oboe, but I always loved piano as well, and I played violin. I was the youngest of nine children and all played instruments. Even in my first year of university I did a double major in piano and oboe, but I loved the oboe, and it won out.

Real Beauty: How tough is it? You are all leaders in your fields, but do you still have to audition?

Diana: I believe nobody likes to audition. I want to know what they want. You just tell yourself, well look, go for it. This is an opportunity for me to learn something – an opportunity to show what I can do, and take it from there. And I always think well, if I'm not what they want, then I'm not what they want.

Cheryl: Well, I think you get to a point when you are mature enough, and old enough, to know that they'll pick you if they want you. You have to have that confidence in yourself. You can't control everything. Believe in yourself.

Alyssa-Jane: I get upset about auditions, because they've seen my picture, or they've seen my work. With some jobs, you just want to go, it's simple: you know I can do this, or you know that I'm out of my depth. And I think, 'I don't really know why you don't say that'.

Jeanne: They know what you look like, for sure.

Alyssa-Jane: You never know!

Jeanne: They should know.

Alyssa-Jane: Yes. I look at it and I go, 'right, maybe there's one person in that room that's never seen me, doesn't know me, and wants to have a little peek at what I'm about, so I'm going to learn that script, I'm going to learn that acting, I'm going to blow their socks off.' And if they then come out go 'look, that was an amazing audition, but we wanted someone with brown hair, then that's it.'

Jeanne: How could you not have brown hair though? I'd just say I'd wear a wig!

CHERYL
BARKER

OPERA SINGER

"You get to a point when you're mature enough, and old enough, to know that they'll pick you if they want you. You have to have that confidence in yourself."



DIANA
DOHERTY

SYDNEY SYMPHONY
PRINCIPAL OBOE

"Having children is something that's incredibly special and I think it really puts perspective on what we do."





RACHAEL BECK

SINGER/ACTOR

"I want to be remembered as someone who brought joy to people through my work - even changed their life for a moment during a song or performance."

Rachael: Well, they could always remember you for another role, perhaps.

Alyssa-Jane: You've got to be in it to win it.

Rachael: I probably wouldn't audition now unless it was for a specific role. I used to turn up to those general auditions, where you would never hear back, and you would get there and think 'what am I doing here?'

Jeanne: A friend once said to me : 'darling, whenever that happens, go round to the shop and buy a large bottle of wine, then go home and drink the lot'. You had to do that sort of thing because it was so hurtful, but it does sort out the weak from the tough. The tough bit is what we do - we've got sticking power. If you can sustain the audition, with everything that's going on... you'll get there eventually.

Real Beauty: Has reality television has a real impact in the arts in Australia?

Jeanne: Yes. Most actors will tell you that if someone offers them the opportunity to do something, they kind of have to consider it to some degree. Ultimately, the people that are involved in reality television shows can't do what an actor who has got 10, 12, 20 years under their belt can do.

Rachael: It is a worldwide trend. But the Australian arts industry is a small one, so anything that has an impact on how much home-grown material is made is going to have a dramatic effect on the industry. Everyone I speak to is hoping that it will change soon.

Alyssa-Jane: We have actors coming out of NIDA and going on *Home and Away* for three years. I think it's because more people are going into the arts. They just can't think of what else they can do. Even the process of becoming a performer or an actor, or whatever you want to call it, has been turned into a reality TV show.

Cheryl: Everything now is about budgeting and money.

Jeanne: I think that young people will just accept any low salary, anything - just to get in. But I'm just as bad. In 1974 I was getting paid \$25, twice a week. And I thought, oh, I just may as well take it. Ten years later they hadn't put it up.

Real Beauty: What about the cost of going to the theatre?

Diana: Oh, I think its very high but not for the effort that goes into the performances.

Jeanne: All the musicals are failing or closing early because people really can't afford it. They're in the city, they can't park there, they have to catch a taxi both ways and, you know, sometimes, how much is it a seat?

Cheryl: Oh over \$100, up to \$250.

Jeanne: My god. And I do understand that people can't afford it.

Rachael: The reason they are so expensive is because we are getting all these musicals from America. It has to be absolutely amazing. So it costs thousands and thousands of dollars to actually bring musicals out, and the tickets have to be that much money.

Jeanne: Yes it is a shame. There's been this amazing advance in technology - with television, they can get their DVDs and Foxtel or whatever, so why should they go out and look for arts?

Diana: But there is nothing like live theatre.

Jeanne: Oh, I know.

Diana: To boost you up and make you feel great.

Real Beauty: How do you want to be remembered?

Jeanne: Just like my mother. She could do anything. I'd come home from school, and she'd be on the roof, fixing a tile, or she would have fixed the whole dining room. She was never scared of doing a thing.

Cheryl: I would like to have had an impact on people's lives. And I think that that's the thing about the arts world - that you can make an impact on peoples lives. People go there to escape - to feel some sort of vibration, that the voice gives to the world.

Rachael: It might sound corny, but I want to be remembered as someone who brought joy to people through my work - even changed their life for a moment during a song or performance.

Alyssa-Jane: I agree. That's what performing - what we all do - is all about.

Diana: As a generous person who wasn't afraid to give both on stage, and to my family. 🍷

OUR REAL WOMEN SAY... I just love the humorous honesty of Jeanne Little. She has an amazing spirit and zest for life. It is always inspiring to read about successful women who have created their destiny. **FIONA SCOTTS**

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