



Australian Theatre Archive

Barry Creyton

b. 1939

Barry Creyton is an actor, writer, director and composer who has succeeded as a theatre maker on three continents. He was a much adored television personality early in his career in Australia, when he was catapulted to stardom as part of the satirical television phenomenon that was *The Mavis Bramston Show*. Soon afterwards he hosted his own variety show. He has written three highly successful stage plays and appeared on stage and television throughout his career. Creyton has distinguished himself playing and writing comic roles although he has also played dramatic roles, and in recent years he has focused on adapting and directing classic plays. Barry Creyton is a purist who prefers live performance to television, and cautions against a tendency in directors to 'do a concept production rather than a production which reflects the value of the play'. He has constantly challenged himself throughout his career. As soon as he achieved national celebrity status in the 1960's he decided to leave Australia in order to work where nobody knew him, and test himself in a new environment as a working actor.

Creyton is based in Los Angeles where he lives in the Hollywood Hills. He ended up in tinsel town by accident in 1991, began working as a scriptwriter, and disliked the city at first dubbing it 'Purgatory with Palm Trees', but soon fell in love with its glamorous cinema history, the marvellous and vibrant small live theatres and the absorbing world of entertainment that is the life blood of the city.

Origins

Creyton was born in Brisbane in 1939. He told me with a smile that he was a '*Gone With the Wind* baby'. Two of his grandparents were actors and his great grandfather was celebrated British Shakespearian actor William Hoskins who was tutor to a young Sir Henry Irving. But Creyton's parents were not interested in legitimate theatre or books or art. They did take him to a theatre however - Brisbane's variety venue, the Theatre Royal where he was exposed to the burlesque of George Wallace Junior and the Nudie Cuties.

Figuring there had to be more to live theatre than this, in his early teens, he washed cars at a local dealership to earn the price of admission to Saturday matinees at His Majesty's Theatre where he watched Toni Lamond for the first time and saw international stars including the great Judith Anderson's *Medea*, Googie Withers in *The Deep Blue Sea*, Sybil Thorndike in *The Chalk Garden*. Passionate about the theatre, he joined all three of the little theatres in Brisbane and began to learn the craft of theatre making. In 1958 Creyton auditioned for the first intake of the National Institute for Dramatic Art (NIDA). He was disappointed that he never heard back from them. A year later he discovered that NIDA had offered him a scholarship but that they had written to his mother rather than him, and she had withheld the letter.

The young Creyton left home soon after this discovery. He worked as an announcer on radio 4BH in Brisbane, in radio plays for the ABC, and in the amateur theatre; by age twenty, he was playing leads on national radio, in theatre and hosted his own Sunday night radio program about world theatre.

His mentor was the extraordinary Babette Stephens, an English woman from Knightsbridge with a posh accent, who he recalls 'taught me just about everything I needed to know about professional theatre. She was an amazing woman. And everything now that I value about being in the theatre, sustaining a performance, how to behave in the theatre, she taught me. My debt to her is incalculable'. Stephens was a director and advocate for theatre. She first offered the young Creyton a key role as the officious Czechoslovakian sergeant in *The Great Sebastians* in which she played the lead, and the villainous Nazi in Lillian Hellman's *Watch on the Rhine* (1959). She helped him prepare for the lead role in Noel Coward's *Nude with Violin* (1960) and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (1960). Stephens also demonstrated an expert sense of comic timing as an actor, and knew how to 'control her audience' through the her pauses and delivery of lines. ⁱ Creyton observed and learned.

In 1960 Creyton moved to Melbourne and immediately secured a role in a musical revue at the Star Theatre. Although he was not trained as a singer, Creyton found himself singing frequently over the next ten years - in TV variety, theatre revue and in revue and musical comedy in London - 'faking it' he said. He had learned music as a child and discovered he could compose, contributing to the scores at the Phillip Street revues in Sydney and eventually for *The Mavis Bramston Show*. It was Creyton who composed the iconic song 'Togetherness'.

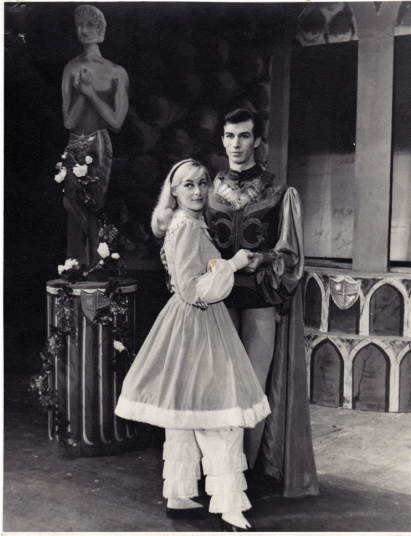
In Melbourne, following the Star Theatre Revue, Creyton landed his first dramatic role in a Clifford Odets play called *Winter Journey* (1960), directed by John Sumner and playing alongside Googie Withers. It was an important learning experience working with Withers, a thoughtful, disciplined actor who prepared carefully and showed extraordinary attention to detail. The play finished its tour in Sydney and Creyton decided to stay. He worked in radio serials and played Lorenzo in a television production for the ABC of *The Merchant of Venice*. Though too young for the role, he talked his way into playing the villain in *East Lynne*, the opening show at the Music Hall Theatre Restaurant in Neutral Bay in 1961 where he received excellent reviews and a considerable following establishing him in Sydney theatre.



East Lynne

The theatre restaurant seated 500, and patrons were served by waiters wearing Victorian dress. The popular venue revived this form of variety entertainment in live theatre in Sydney, boosting the city's offerings considerably. ⁱⁱ Creyton played villains in *The Face at the Window* (1963) and *The Evil Men Do* (1964) and wrote two successful shows for the venue - *Lady Audley's Secret* (1962), in which he played the villain again, and the western spoof *How the West was Lost* (1964). He also appeared in a revue at the Phillip Theatre in 1962 where he met Noeline Brown. Brown joined him in *Face at the Window*, playing a woman of the world. Villains by night, the two simultaneously played childrens' matinees of *Beauty and the Beast*.

Beauty and the Beast



Creyton was tall, lean and handsome, with neat attractive features and thick, glossy dark brown hair. He had (and still has) a deep, rich, distinctively resonant voice. As a young man, he had the looks of a matinee idol, and spoke with impeccable diction.

From the outset of his career, he mastered irony, pathos, and comic timing. He looked out into the audience at the music hall theatre one night and saw the well-known comic actors Gordon Chater and Carol Raye alongside a row of television executives looking back at him. They were assessing him for a television role. Within weeks Creyton was a household name and star of *The Mavis Bramston Show* on ATN-7. His life transformed. Suddenly there was no privacy. On one visit to a department store with his mother in Brisbane he was set upon by a

group of fans who tore his clothes for souvenirs. But Creyton enjoyed working on the satirical television program, and recalls that the other cast members Gordon Chater, Carol Raye and June Salter became 'like family'. Chater was a 'tough taskmaster' however and one day when Creyton was almost an hour late for a rehearsal, Chater 'tore hell out of me'. Since then Creyton has never been late for a rehearsal anywhere, such was the shame that Chater aroused in him for his unprofessional behaviour.

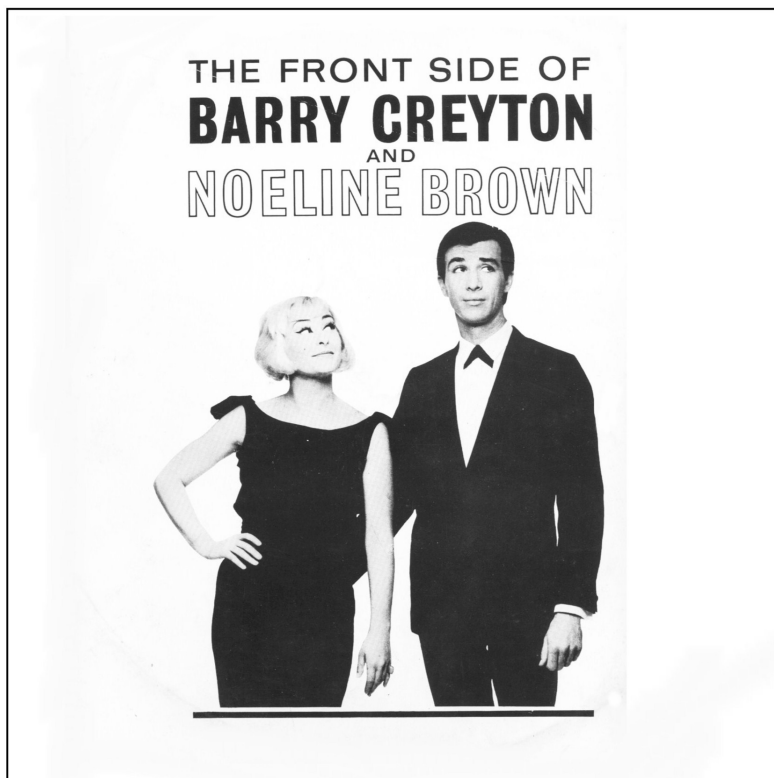
The Mavis Bramston Show required an intense schedule: Chater and Creyton rehearsed together at home on the weekends in order to prepare for the Monday taping in the studio at Epping. They recorded the show in front of a live audience and on Tuesdays they began rehearsing for the following week's show. In the first two years, they produced 46 shows in each year. Looking back Creyton recognises that after the death in 1965 of the 'brave Michael Plant' who was the 'driving force' of the show, the satire waned and by the end of 1966, Mavis became a variety show with a little spice. It was no longer the ground-breaking satire it was when it began.

The Mavis Bramston Show

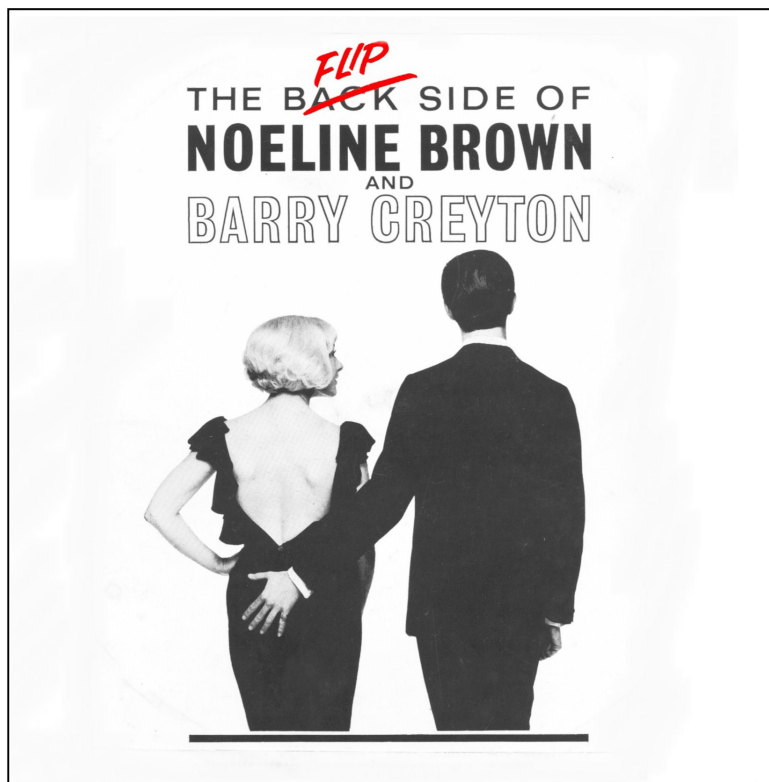


In a revue at Phillip Street called *What's New* in 1962 Creyton met the actor Noeline Brown and the two became great friends. They appreciated each other's sense of humour and comic style. They shared the fact that they were both baritones. Each found the other amusing and Brown recalls that Creyton revealed he had learned to play the piano accordion as a boy but insisted that 'Good taste is knowing how to play the piano accordion but choosing not to'.ⁱⁱⁱ They began to write and perform sketches together and recorded the first comedy LP ever made in Australia for Festival Records called *The Front and Flipside of Barry Creyton and Noeline Brown*. In the week of its release it outsold the Beatles,

Elvis Presley and the Rolling Stones. But every track was banned from radio because it was regarded as too risqué. A second album followed - *The Not So Wet and Dry Side of Barry Creyton and Noeline Brown*.



After recording that LP Creyton farewelled Brown at the airport. A journalist stopped Creyton and informed him that Catholic bishop Thomas Muldoon had complained about one of the sketches on *The Mavis Bramston Show* and declared that he would divest himself of shares in Ampol. Creyton flippantly expressed surprise that a bishop held any shares, when he should be more concerned with heavenly wealth. He was appalled the next day when a tabloid banner headline read 'Actor Attacks Bishop'.^{iv} 'The only thing missing from the unflattering front page picture was the axe.'



Creyton left *Mavis* to host his own variety show called *The Barry Creyton Show* for Channel Seven in Melbourne, producing five half hours of television a week in back to back filming in front of a live audience, and commuting weekly from Sydney. At the same time Creyton performed live in Frank Strain's *Sesame Club* in Sydney five nights a week. Creyton's television show was not as

successful as he had hoped because in his view they 'paid the star too much and the writers not enough'.^v

The Barry Creyton Show



London

When Creyton went to London in 1968, he joined Equity and immediately gained a spot in the television series *The Expert* with Marius Goring, participated in a national tour of *Abelard and Heloise*, directed by the Australian Bill Redmond, played a featured role in the musical *Liz*, performed with Michael Flanders in a revue at the Mayfair Theatre and maintained a steady role in a radio serial on BBC2. He hasn't always had back-to-back roles however and he is clear that the uncertainties of an actor's life are

extremely tough. At one stage in order to make ends meet he took a job as a typist. His sole joy in this period was typing personal letters for the legendary actor Michael MacLiammoir.

Creyton performed with the English actors Leslie Phillips, Roy Kinnear and Elpeth Gray in a play called *Roger's Last Stand* that reached the West End. When Creyton's reviews surpassed those of Phillips, he became *persona non grata* with the famous comic actor. The drama critic Harold Hobson quipped that Creyton had more of the implicit insolence that one expects from an English gentleman than Leslie Phillips ever had. Once Phillips got over the slight he showed considerable generosity towards Creyton but tensions remained. During a run of the play at the Theatre Royal in Bath, Creyton met Roddy Llewellyn. One evening Creyton accepted an invitation to Llewellyn's house for supper after the show. 'The other guests included Princess Margaret and her bodyguards'. Creyton could not relax. During the conversation Princess Margaret confused Leslie Phillips with Terry-Thomas. Creyton reported the error to the egotistical Phillips who was incensed. The rivalries between actors were extreme in this cast and gave Creyton great insight into the dynamics of actors at work, insights on which he has drawn in his own comic writing. His first comic play, a farce called *Follow That Husband*, was produced by Ray Cooney in Southend-on-Sea in 1974.



During his London days Creyton gave up smoking after losing his voice during a season of *Salad Days* in Coventry. In order to cope with the demands of acting he also gave up drinking alcohol, and began to work out in a gym regularly. When he returned to Sydney he was so transformed physically from the tall, elegant be-suited man of *Mavis Bramston* to a hulking muscle bound giant of a gym junkie, that his friend Noeline Brown did not recognise him. He has continued to keep up a daily fitness regime since

that time. When I met him at his house in the Hollywood Hills, he proudly showed me his own fully equipped gym.

Creyton played the arrogant right wing Simon in David Williamson's *Don's Party* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1975, directed by the Australian-born Michael Blakemore. Creyton looks back on that production with pride and fondness: 'I loved doing it. I loved playing that character because he's such an awful ponce'. He particularly admired Blakemore as a director who had a 'total view of what the play must look like ... but understands the torture actors go through trying to find their character'.

Back in Sydney Creyton appeared in *Son of Naked Vicar* in 1977, and on the popular *Blankety Blanks* game show on television. He was a much loved television personality and recalls that participating in the show 'was like going to a party every week'. He says that Graham Kennedy was a delight to work with and once again he enjoyed working with Noeline Brown. The repartee in the show was spontaneous, with no rehearsals or scripting of jokes. Creyton agreed to ten-week stints on TV series *The Young Doctors*, *The Restless Years* and *Skyways* but insisted that his roles discontinue after the ten weeks so he could concentrate on live theatre.

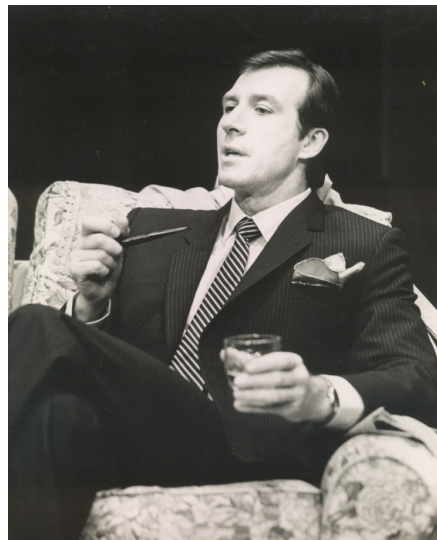
Creyton and Carol Raye performed a four-minute sketch written by Creyton every week on *The Mike Walsh Show* for two years, some 90 sketches in total, once again delighting a national audience. Creyton also wrote episodes of *Carson's Law* as the lead writer for the series, and appeared in Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* with Stuart Wagstaff and Carol Raye for a twelve month run in this hectic, demanding comedy including a tour in 1982-3. The play is one that inspired Creyton as a writer, and he considers it one of the most significant comedies of its era. Creyton's performance in Alan Ayckbourn's *Seasons Greetings* (1984) was hailed as 'superb' by the *Sydney Morning Herald* critic Harry Kippax,^{vi} and nominated for the Critics' Circle Award. He was accompanied to the ceremony by his director John Krummel. When the award went to another actor, Krummel shouted 'You've been robbed!' Creyton hurried out of the venue crimson with embarrassment while stifling laughter.

Also at Marian Street at, he played in *The Philanthropist*, *Side by Side* by Sondheim, *Absurd Person Singular* and *Pack of Lies*.

He was now an established and highly regarded comic actor at the peak of his powers.



Seasons Greetings



Pack of Lies

Double Act

Creyton wrote *Double Act* for Noeline Brown and himself, a virtuoso piece for two accomplished comedy actors who worked well as a pair, and allowed them to show their strength in the form they loved in a sparkling two-hander. The script demonstrated Creyton's mastery of comedy writing in theatre, with its sustained allusion to Coward's *Private Lives* and its witty one-liners. Creyton told me emphatically that *Double Act* offers a portrayal of two 'extraordinary people trying to have an ordinary relationship. It's not about ordinary people'. The play opens with a divorced couple, George and Alexandra, who meet again in a restaurant unexpectedly after many years. The repartee is sizzling right from the beginning, and over the course of the play the couple get back together again.

George: It's been a long time.

Alexandra: Not long enough.

[She moves to pass him. He stops her.]

George: Oh, wait a minute... you can't just... I mean, how long is it since we...? Five years? You haven't changed a bit.

Alexandra: George...

George: You remember my name!

Alexandra: I'm hungry. I'd like to finish my dinner.

George: A couple of pleasantries won't ruin your appetite.

Alexandra: You overestimate my intestinal fortitude.

George: You underestimate my pleasantries.

....

George: Divorce made a bitter woman of you Alex.

Alexandra: Divorce was too good for you. I should've castrated you.

George: You did my dear. Often. (Scene 1,2)^{vii}



Double Act

During a long tour of *Corpse* with Gordon Chater in 1986, Creyton had a motorcycle accident, breaking his leg, and spent seven months in recovery. During that period of inactivity he drafted and re-drafted *Double Act*, the play that was to transform his career. The play premiered in Sydney at the Ensemble Theatre, directed by Sandra Bates in 1987 and broke box office records at the small independent theatre. When Creyton read Harry Kippax's glowing review he burst into tears of joy. Kippax wrote:

An examination of a broken marriage, it begins in blaze away style with salvos of almost continuously funny one-liners, and then modulates towards comedy and, eventually, even a kind of acid pathos. Its craftsmanship as entertainment is first rate.... Noeline Brown and Barry Creyton, playing at a cracking pace, give us a sense of hazardous circus skills with their concentration, balance, poise and expert timing. Barry Creyton has a hit. So does the Ensemble. So do Noeline and Barry. ^{viii}

Immediately the rights were sold and the play has been produced all over the world in more than 25 languages, including Spanish, German, Italian and Japanese. In 1996 Garry McDonald and his wife Diane Craig appeared in one of the many revivals of the play for the Perth Theatre Company that toured Australia.

In 1988, his achievements listing the direction of his adaptation of the hit musical *Nunsense* and starring in his own play *Double Act*, he was awarded the prestigious Norman Kessell Memorial Award for his contributions to Australian theatre as actor, director and playwright.

Life After Double Act

After the immense success of *Double Act*, Creyton focussed on writing and directing for some years. The first production he directed was the mad cap musical *Nunsense* in 1987. The production toured Australia, broke box office records in many cities, and for some time there were two productions playing simultaneously. Creyton also directed a successful production of *Nunsense* in Dublin. His skill as both an adaptor and director came to prominence with this blockbuster as he adjusted the script to suit Australian audiences and again to suit Irish audiences. ^{ix}

Creyton has never lost his zeal for comic acting however. In 1996 he appeared in an acclaimed production of Coward's *Blithe Spirit* in his hometown, Brisbane, alongside Sheila Bradley, Carol Burns, and Belinda Giblin.

Blithe Spirit



Creyton told me that he writes slowly 'I don't write a play every week ... which is why now I mostly direct'. Yet Creyton has written several successful plays. He wrote a farce called *Valentines Day*, a black comedy about revenge, sex and marriage that premiered at the Marian Street Theatre in Sydney in 1998, co-directed by John Krummel and Creyton. Creyton also appeared in the first production of the play, after a break from the stage of some years. The play has since been performed in six languages. Two years later, after twelve years in Hollywood, Creyton wrote another comedy for the Northside Theatre Company in Sydney called *Later Than Spring* (2000), dealing with age, snobbery and

materialism. Once more he directed and appeared in the production. In Los Angeles Creyton has worked as a writer and director in the theatre. He wrote the sketch material for a New York revue *Secrets Every Smart Traveler Should Know* which ran for two and a half years off Broadway. He avoids acting for television because he hates auditioning (read: 'terrified') but also because he prefers live performance. He adapted a little known play by Noel Coward called *Peace In Our Time* inserting nine of Coward's songs into the text for the Antaeus Theatre Company in North Hollywood. The play, written by Coward in 1946, imagines Britain under occupation by the Nazis. Casey Stangl directed the premiere of Creyton's adaptation in 2011. The Creyton adaptation addresses loyalty, nationalism and war in a way that spoke to a contemporary audience. It was an immense success and won three major awards. He also appeared for Antaeus as Hulot in *Cousin Bette* (2010) and in *The Curse of Oedipus* (2014) playing Apollo, the god. 'Type casting' he insists.

Cousin Bette

In 2007 Creyton and Brown worked together again at the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney in Peter Quilter's play *Glorious*, the true story of Florence Foster Jenkins, an eccentric singer with no talent (made into a film in 2016 with Meryl Streep as Jenkins). The two actors, Creyton and Brown reunited again in 2009 at the Ensemble for a two hander by Quilter called *Duets* in which they each played four different characters.



Sydney Stage critic Lloyd Bradford Syke wrote of Creyton's first character in *Duets*: 'Creyton, who, out of character, looks as fit as a fiddle for his, or any age, is barely recognisable as an elderly bloke with a pronounced paunch and bushy eyebrows. His very carriage, as well as every other facet of his bodily, facial, emotional and vocal disposition are adapted entirely to become Jonathon. It's an extraordinary, jaw-dropping feat of finesse and his first

Ensemble
Theatre
August 2009

DUETS
four one-act plays
by
Peter Quilter



saunter across the stage would've been enough to confirm his status as a laudable elder statesman of Australian and international theatre.'

For a man who started out in radio gathered around a microphone with a group of actors performing live, he has in some ways come full circle. Creyton has developed and directed a series of classic audio productions of *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Tempest*, for Blackstone Audio, and *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *As You Like It* for LA Theatre Works. He uses large casts, original musical scoring, sound effects and intense rehearsal periods - the studio productions take four months to complete. The LA Theatre Works productions are performed with well-known actors before live audiences, broadcast nationally and committed to CD.

Of course the productions are far more sophisticated in their use of complex audio recording technology than were their counterparts of the '50s and '60s, but they do capture the same romance of the radio era, and the quality of the acting and use of music are exceptional. Creyton's expertise as a writer, actor and director are all called upon in these productions. He seems to be something of a comedy guru and a classical man of the theatre. Creyton continues to write in various genres for multiple audiences, and is the author of two novels for teenagers called *The Dogs of Pompeii* and *Nero Goes to Rome*, (2007), both co-written with Vaughan Edwards.

Anne Pender

The author gratefully acknowledges Barry Creyton for generously providing information in interview and correspondence.

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ⁱ Barry Creyton quoted in Rob Johnson and David Smiedt, *Boom Boom: A Century of Australian Comedy*, Sydney: Hodder Headline, 1991, 152.

ⁱⁱ Katharine Brisbane (ed.), *Entertaining Australia*, Sydney: Currency, 294.

ⁱⁱⁱ Noeline Brown, *Longterm Memoir*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 81.

^{iv} Noeline Brown, 97.

^v Creyton quoted in *Boom Boom*, 172.

^{vi} Harry Kippax, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 1984, 40.

^{vii} Barry Creyton, *Double Act*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1988, 2.

^{viii} Kippax, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 Sept 1987.

^{ix} Lynne Murphy, 'Barry Creyton', in P. Parsons (ed.), *Companion to Theatre in Australia*, Sydney: Currency Press, 1995, 168.

