



Humphries, Barry (b. 1934)

by Andres Mario Zervigon

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Barry Humphries, a character actor, singer, writer, poet and painter, is known principally for the stage personas he has developed over a long career. Of these personas, the most internationally recognized is Dame Edna Everage, an Australian housewife whose sheer force of personality has enabled her to achieve the status of "International Mega-Star."

Humphries, who is heterosexual, distances himself from the notion that playing Everage is playing drag, yet he consciously performs her role with a campy excess and sensitively cultivates a gay and lesbian following. His great success as Everage has therefore come without denying the gay and lesbian contribution to cross-dressing entertainment.

Just as important, Humphries' consistent performance of Everage with a "straight face" makes her housewife earnestness seem as queer as his cross-dressed production of it. It is this critical play of perceived normality against cross-dressing queerness that has made Humphries' contribution to glbtq culture so significant.

Humphries was born in 1934 into an upper-middle-class family in Melbourne, Australia, where he spent a comfortable youth. His pleasant, though mundane, surroundings as a boy would later inspire his creation of Edna Everage, equally a product of understated Australian suburbia, but one catapulted into a world of glamor and sophistication by which she is slightly bewildered.

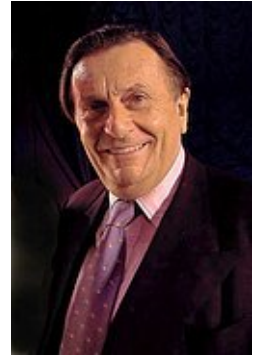
Humphries began writing and performing in high school, but his college encounter with Robert Motherwell's 1952 anthology *The Dada Painters and Poets* gave him a taste for the culturally provocative. He demonstrated this taste in various theater productions and television shows in the 1950s, most of which spoofed Australia's own sense of its cultural backwardness.

Although these shows were controversial at the time, the largely male personas he contrived in them have since become popular in his home country. Humphries' playwriting, movies, acting, and poetry have also been successful in Britain, where he has principally lived since the early 1960s.

Humphries' persona of Edna Everage has earned him the most notoriety and greatest success. Performed on stage and as the hostess of a successful British talk show, *An Audience with Dame Edna*, the character has taken on a life of her own.

In both his theater performances and broadcasts as Everage, Humphries adopts the conceit that this Australian housewife has become fantastically successful as a celebrity and wishes to share the wisdom of her transformation.

The awkwardness Humphries always expresses when performing Edna, mostly visible in his not-so-feminine gait, serves to highlight the fact that he is a man performing a woman. But this same awkwardness also



Barry Humphries in 2001.
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plays up Everage's purportedly simple origins in Australia's suburbs.

This use of drag to express masquerade and transformation, rather than drag itself, may be what makes Humphries' performance of Everage so appealing to a general audience. But it is particularly his ability to play Edna as a socially conservative and naïve woman that makes this persona so important to queer culture.

As a man wearing women's clothing, Humphries/Everage will discuss the warmth of her old kitchen, her scandalous celebrity colleagues, the joy she has in her son Kenny's "artistic" inclinations, or why her daughter and daughter's girlfriend do not have boyfriends. Yet the inability of this drag persona to recognize the non-normative heightens the irony of Edna's conservativeness, to the point that it too seems queer.

In one particularly interesting example of this queering strategy, Humphries/Edna invited notorious homophobe Mary Whitehouse to be interviewed on *An Audience with Dame Edna*. Although Whitehouse was then head of Britain's National Viewers and Listener's Association, a reactionary group fighting "inappropriate" broadcast content, she found herself on television politely chatting with a man dressed as a woman.

The queering of the socially conservative discourse spoken by both Whitehouse and Dame Edna made Humphries's implied critique a comic pleasure for most of his audience.

Humphries pursued these same queering strategies in his recent Broadway successes *Dame Edna: The Royal Tour* (1999) and *Dame Edna: Back with a Vengeance* (2004). He also continues courting gay men, whom he refers to as "friends of Kenny," both in the gay press and on stage and television.

Humphries' versatility as a character actor is brilliantly illustrated in Douglas McGrath's film version of Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (2002), where Humphries undertakes two roles. As Dame Edna, he performs the significant character of Mrs. Crummles, but he also plays a small male role.

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About the Author

Andres Mario Zervigon earned his Ph.D. from Harvard University and now teaches at Rutgers University. He specializes in the art and design of Germany's Weimar period and in the painting of Britain's post-World War II era.