



DIARY  
JULIA ZEMIRO

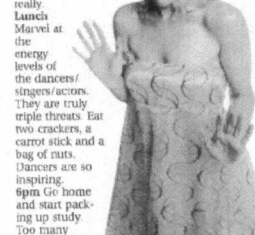
## Dancing between the lines

**WEDNESDAY**  
8am Fly back from Sydney after hosting the final *Song for the Socceroos* on SBS. Drink a hideous coffee on the plane and promptly doze off.  
10am Rehearsal for *Eurobeat*. The 20-strong company has finalised the big dance number. I have yet to learn the choreography. I have also yet to learn how to dance.  
Noon Up to Triple M to chat with Mick Molloy about *Thank God You're Here* episode. Improvising on that show is as good as it gets.  
2pm Back at *Eurobeat* rehearsals. Jason, my co-host, and I practise our Bosnian accents.  
6pm Drive home via Punt Road.  
7pm Still on Punt Road.  
8pm Finally home with my boyfriend Jeremiah drinking red wine to forget Punt Road.

**THURSDAY**  
8am Return frock borrowed for the Logies to Cose Ipanema. A beautiful dress that made me feel like Audrey Hepburn. Cry as I return it. Beg to keep it. Embarrassed, I leave the shop and buy a croissant to make me feel better. Find myself staring into a jewellery shop. I have morphed into Audrey Hepburn.  
9.30am Sit in 'car office' and quickly organise renovations. Have decided to move house during busiest time of the year. Genius.  
10am Rehearsals. Regret earlier croissant as I discover part of big dance routine includes being lifted several times by two gorgeous male dancers. Oops.  
Noon Go to move car as parking officers are everywhere. Notice I have flat tyre. Brilliant. Free parking all day!  
6pm Arrive at car exhausted from high-kicking dance number. Realise I still have to change the tyre. Spy a parking ticket flapping against the windshield.

**FRIDAY**  
10am Final day in rehearsal space. Costume parade is hilarious as we drown in sequins, feathers and tight satin. Euro fashion — you can't beat it.  
6pm Jolt to train station to avoid Punt Road, then have dinner with a group of friends.  
Watch *Grease* with six kids under 12. Try to avoid explaining what a "Frenchy" is.

**SATURDAY**  
9am First day in the theatre at the Palms. It's a stunning room. You find it.  
9.30am Get lost in casino. Get caught up in a rough game of blackjack. No, not really.  
Launch Marvel at the energy levels of the dancers/singers/actors. They are truly triple threats. Eat two crackers, a carrot stick and a bag of nuts.  
Dancers are so inspiring.  
6pm Go home and start packing up study. Too many books. Will give some away. Pack up bathroom.  
Too many cakes of soap. Will recycle them as presents. Pack clothes. Too many outfits I have never ever worn. Just can't throw them out.  
9.15pm Watch *RockKutz* on SBS. It's one of my favourite episodes with Angry Anderson and Sarah McLeod doing the duet *Highway to Hell*. Ron Scott would have approved.



I buy a flesh-coloured bra with a lot of push-up. I ask the shop assistant for a 'flesh-coloured bra'. Clearly I am tired.

SUNDAY

# Artist in wonderland

from EXTRA 13

break off only half-remembered: the deep questioning of eyes in shy faces, the pleasure of simple things, like a bunch of flowers, in a world fed on the sensational and horrific."

**H**IS work became increasingly haunting. "People in his pictures are isolated," Barry Humphries said in Moore's documentary, "and it's of course very obvious to say so many of them derived from his perception of his wife's increasing isolation as her blindness deepened. As the darkness grew in her life, his pictures got darker."

In 1960 Blackman won the prized Helena Rubenstein scholarship, which meant a move to London the following year. By then Nolan and Boyd had moved to London, and Melbourne was losing its appeal. "It's very hard if you don't have friends," Blackman says now. "Everybody's poor, there was six o'clock closing, it was hard to go to the pictures because it was too expensive. I came to the conclusion that's not what I want out of life."

He has tender memories of being a father. "When I lived in London the kids said they'd like a party, so I said 'There's snow outside, the fruit shop's open', so we went down and bought half a case of oranges," he remembers now. "We cut them in half, squeezed the oranges for the juice and filled them up with green jelly. The party was little cups with lemonade and oranges with green jelly. It was all very happy, they were all dancing around, you know what kids are like."

The Blackman Barry Humphries knew in London was bright and good company but was "a very restless and solitary figure" who was sometimes cruel. "He could be terribly sarcastic and very biting and unkind to people who couldn't strike back," Humphries said in the Moore documentary. "His cruelty was specially notorious when he'd had a few drinks."

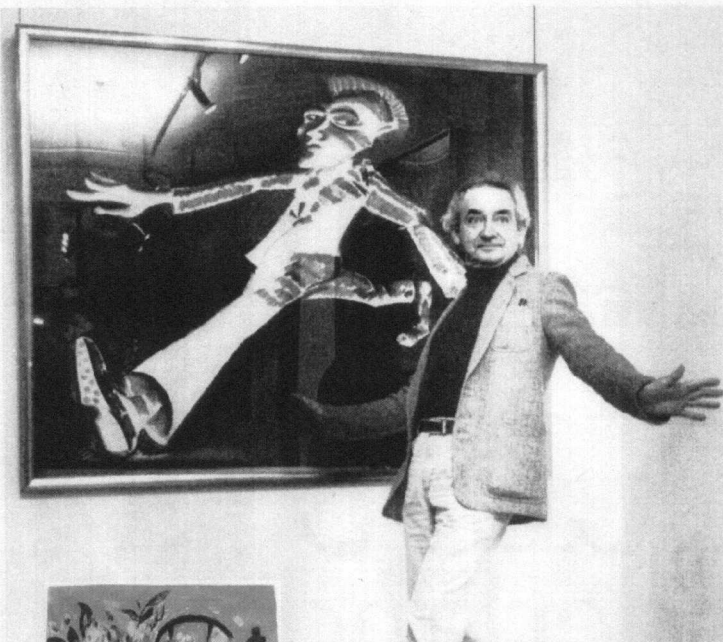
Missing the Australian bush, the sea and the "pretty girls", Blackman returned to Australia six years later. It's thought that had Blackman stayed in London, he would have become famous across Europe, but he wanted to raise his children in Australia. "I didn't want to be world-famous," he says now.

After four years in Australia, Blackman took the family to Paris in 1970, where they lived for a year above a cafe. He soaked up what he saw, walking in the Luxembourg Gardens and spending hard hours at the easel in two studios, one overlooking a car park, which he preferred to a view of bridges on the Seine, and later a converted billiard room.

"I used to get up at about eight o'clock — nothing opened until about 8.30 — and there was a little tiny cafe about a hundred yards from where we lived which was open at six o'clock for the workers," Blackman remembers. "So you'd get some jambon and eggs and a short black. I liked to look around and see what the atmosphere is. Anybody would, who had a bit of common sense."

Barbara Blackman has written: "On Saturdays we went to the shows, on Sundays out to parks on the outskirts, on some weekends to ... the castles of the Loire." She writes that Blackman struggled to master the language. "Inability to speak French in no way muted CB. Cheerfully, he read me *Figaro* in a crowded Metro, pronouncing each word as though English and inserting a kind of hiccup for each apostrophe."

Auguste Blackman, now 49 and also a painter, lived in



ABOVE: Charles Blackman hangs it up in 1963; LEFT: *If you do one thing*; BELOW: *Schoolgirl in the lino*, circa 1954.

"We had a lovely talk about painting. It was a conversation I never thought I'd have. It was like a bolt from the blue. I thought he was long past it."

AUGUSTE BLACKMAN, son



London from the age of three to nine. He remembers a father with a great imagination who would, because of his wife's falling eight, often read aloud to her and their children, Auguste and his younger siblings Christabel and Barnaby. "There was never a chance for life to be boring," Auguste says now. "Everyone would congregate at our house because Charles and Barbara were the most fun."

In 1978, after 27 years of marriage, Barbara Blackman wrote a letter to her husband "rendering my resignation". "The man I dearly loved and always will love became another person," she told a reporter in 2004. "Dr Charles Jekyll turned into Mr Charlie Hyde."

Blackman has almost no contact with his three ex-wives. From his second marriage he has a daughter, Beatrice, now a 24-year-old musician, and son Felix, a 22-year-old student. He has another son, Adam, now 16, from a marriage in 1989 to a much younger woman, Victoria. According to Amadio, Blackman last saw Adam when he was four. "He was a nice little child," she says. "He looked very much like Charles."

Blackman seems resigned to never seeing Adam, but is in touch with Auguste and Barnaby, now 43 and a postman, who lives near Sydney, and Christabel, 47, who lives in Spain and restores paintings. "I was his best boy,"

Auguste told *The Sunday Age*. "I miss him dreadfully as a companion."

Auguste remembers the wild days when the Blackman house was the centre of the art world. "Everyone drank," he says. "It was almost like a competition. These were the most creative people in the country and they needed that anaesthetic. To be able to stop and laugh you needed to have the wine."

Of course there was a flip side to the bohemian life and all that drinking. Auguste said everyone — most especially Blackman's wives — had trouble controlling him. "Dad was up at Maroochydore visiting a friend and (third wife) Victoria was accusing Dad

of drinking too much, so she took all the goggles, dug a hole and threw it in. Dad and his friend just laughed and went to the pub three doors away."

**A**UGUSTE says he can relate to his father, despite the ravages of the drink. "I deal with Charlie my own way," he says. "I start by talking about the Marx Brothers, move on to *Alice in Wonderland*, into Proust and finish up with Buster Keaton."

Last year, amid the conversational segues, they had their first serious discussion about art. "We had a lovely talk about painting," Auguste says. "It was a con-



Drink me, 1956, was one of four "missing" Alice paintings being sought by the National Gallery of Victoria. After turning up last week, it will be included in the August exhibition.

exhibition of the *Alice* series in the 1950s, is upset that her friend struggles financially. "Charles is the perfect example of the need for the artist to get a percentage when a painting is resold, as they do in France," she says.

This resale royalty, usually around 5 per cent, was formalised in France in the 1920s and is known as a "droit de suite". Despite debate over several years in Australia about whether artists deserve this royalty, and many attempts to institute it, there is no such provision here.

"A painting that might now sell for \$350,000 was sold by Charles back in the '50s for five guineas," says Amadio. "I think it's fair that artists deserve a percentage."

Art historian Felicity Moore, who is writing the exhibition's catalogue, says Barbara Blackman gave away the major works she held, including three *Alice* paintings in this exhibition. "Barbara is a giver. She believes in sharing. She is a major donor to many galleries in this country."

Olley approached Barbara Blackman recently at a concert. "I said to her 'It'd be nice if Charles gets something,'" Olley said. "Barbara said 'Rather than give them to Charles, I'd rather give them to galleries.'"

Auguste Blackman supports his mother's view. "If she gave him the paintings they would end up in some boardroom or someone's house and the money would be spent on minders. It's a real thrill that the work is out there for people to see."

Amadio is disappointed at Auguste's comment. "It's interesting that Auguste takes the high moral tone when those minders have given Charles another 12 years of life. It's a miracle he survived his stroke. After a lifetime of producing great artwork the least Charles can expect is to be looked after in his later years."

I phoned Barbara Blackman to ask whether she thought it was sad that Blackman owned little of his own work, a question often asked by his admirers. From her home in Canberra, she said: "Oh that's a silly question. What does 'sad' mean? That's a *Woman's Home Journal* question. I'm not the keeper of what he's done with his paintings. Don't ask me what he's core in the last 28 years with other wives and other paintings ... I don't think they (the works) are money-making commodities or for me alone to possess."

Referring to the artist's three marriages, Felicity Moore says: "Marriages can be costly. Like many artists, Charles is not one for accumulating things. Things get sold and you don't retain anything for your old age. Barbara has made a point of preserving this work to find a home in the proper institutions."

Meanwhile, the art world is excited that a master's reputation can be reinforced to a new generation. If a nationwide search initiated last week by the National Gallery of Victoria for the three "missing" Blackmans succeeds, there will be 46 *Alice* works, and it will be the first time they have been shown together. "This is the most exciting exhibition of Australian art for a long time," says Moore.

Back in Sydney, the man at the centre of all the fuss is having salad rolls and tea. There are a couple of gazing spectators. Blackman is no longer the easiest of company. My only point of reference to the old Blackman is the interview he gave in the early '90s, when he spoke fluently of his life and work, a cheeky, wiry, genial presence, an impish larrikin, up for a laugh. You could see what friends such as Barry Humphries enjoyed about him.

At one point I mention something having been a strange situation. Blackman shoots me a look. "All situations are strange, mate."

Blackman's friend and fellow painter Margaret Olley, who met Blackman in Brisbane at the first

pwilmoth@theage.com.au