

## OUR MARJ, the amazing story of Marjorie Lawrence

Recently, whilst driving through the town of Winchelsea, I noticed a large roadside sign, “Marjorie Lawrence Drive, 1907-1979,” and, in the middle of the town, The Globe Theatre, bore the sign “The home of Marjorie Lawrence.” Did these signs refer to the Marjorie Lawrence who was a Wagnerian dramatic soprano who reached fame in the 1930s?



At the time all I knew about Marjorie Lawrence was that she was Australian, sang at The Met in the 1930s and was famous for being the first Brünnhilde to jump on the back of Grane and ride the horse into the flames in the Immolation scene in *Götterdämmerung*. Curiosity aroused, I found a recent biography of Marjorie and her own ghost written autobiography and thus learnt of her connection to Winchelsea.

Marjorie Lawrence was born on a farm near Deans Marsh in country Victoria, the sixth of seven children, and she was brought up there and near Winchelsea, a short distance away. Her mother died when she was two and she moved to live with her grandmother until she too died. As a child she learnt the piano and sang in the church choir and at community events where, from the age of ten, she was a regular soloist. The local parson was a musician and recognised that Marjorie had an outstanding and unusual voice, able to sing across both the contralto and soprano range. By the age of 16 she had decided that she wanted to become a professional singer, a goal that her father violently opposed. In 1925, two days after her eighteenth birthday she ran away to Melbourne, accompanied by her brother, Percy (later Cyril). She was accepted as a student by Ivor Boustead, a prominent singing teacher of the time, found work as a seamstress and began to learn Italian. However, life was difficult and finance tight and she was eventually reconciled with her father and went home to live but continued to commute to Melbourne for singing lessons. In 1926 she entered her first singing competition in Colac and in 1928 she won the Sun Aria and 3LO Gold Medal and became a statewide celebrity.

Later in 1928, at the age of 21, she left for Paris upon the recommendation of John Brownlee, a past student of Ivor Boustead and a member of the Paris Opera company.

She began singing lessons with Cecile Gilly who declared her to be a natural Wagnerian soprano and capable of singing “Falcon roles” in French operas, which require a wild quality. During this time she also learnt French and German. She started singing in concerts in 1929 and in 1932 made her opera debut at the Monte Carlo opera in the role of Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, to critical acclaim. In the same year she auditioned for the Paris Opera and was accepted into the company’s development programme. Her first major roles in Paris were Ortrud in *Lohengrin* and Brünnhilde in 1933. The same year she made her first recordings of Wagner, all in French.

She was offered a contract for the 1934/35 season at The Met to sing Wagner in German but declined, because she was dissatisfied with the terms of the contract and content with her situation at the Paris Opera. She later came to regret this decision as the position at the Met was given to Kirsten Flagstad, who was hard for Marjorie to displace when she did eventually go to New York. She was again approached by The Met in 1935 and agreed to a five week season. It was in January 1936 at her first Met performance as Brünnhilde that Marjorie vaulted onto the back of Grane at the conclusion of *Götterdämmerung* and rode him into the flames - in those days Grane was a real horse. Marjorie had been intent on following Wagner’s explicit stage directions that Brünnhilde should mount her horse and ride into Siegfried’s funeral pyre rather than repeat the accepted practice of walking the horse into the flames.



An elated Marjorie backstage at The Met, having ridden Grane into Siegfried’s funeral pyre. Photo taken from *Wotan’s Daughter*, Richard Davis, Wakefield Press, South Australia, 2012

The audience were astounded and totally delighted, while The Met management were dismayed at all the things that might have gone wrong. The performance was broadcast throughout the USA and was rebroadcast by the ABC the following evening. Marjorie Lawrence was famous. The Australian media followed her progress, always pleased to report on the success of “Our Marj.” It would seem that opera singers at this time received the same attention and acclaim as today’s football and pop music stars.

For the next three years Marjorie sang the season with The Met, sang in Chicago, Buenos Aires and in concert performances and returned to France each year to sing at the Paris Opera and in provincial centres. It is interesting that in the 1930s *The Ring* was included in The Met repertoire most years until the start of the war when Wagner became less popular. As well as Wagnerian roles, Marjorie became famous for her performance of *Salome* in Richard Strauss's opera, where she insisted on doing the Dance of the Seven Veils herself, rather than sing while a dancer performs. She was renowned for the breadth of her range, the expressive capability of her voice, her acting ability, her spontaneity and her athleticism on stage.

In 1938 Marjorie was invited to sing in the Wagner Festival in Zoppot in Poland and she hoped that success there would lead to her being invited to sing in Bayreuth, but alas the war intervened.

In the middle of 1939 she made her first concert tour of Australia and kept her promise to give her first Australian performance in Winchelsea. The concert was held at the Globe Theatre (capacity 200), built by her father in 1926. Marjorie arrived in the town escorted by 100 local citizens on horseback. On subsequent return visits to Australia in 1943 and 1949 her first concerts were always held in Winchelsea before she performed in Melbourne and other capital and provincial cities. She was still in Australia when war broke out in September 1939.

Marjorie returned to the United States; there would be no more travel to Europe for the duration of the war. At The Met she had the pleasure of performing with some of the greats of Wagnerian performance - Lauritz Melchior, Kirsten Flagstad, Lotte Lehmann, Friedrich Schorr; she considered the years 1939 -1941 to be the highpoint of her career.

In early 1941 she met Tom King, a General Practitioner and they were married two months after meeting. Her life now felt complete. When she was asked by the Mexican National Opera to be principal singer for their inaugural season, she persuaded Tom to go with her. At the final dress rehearsal of *Die Walküre* in Mexico City Marjorie collapsed on stage at the end of Act 2. The same evening paralysis set in and she was diagnosed with poliomyelitis; it was lucky Tom was with her. She was 34 years old.

She applied herself to an intensive rehabilitation programme using the Sister Kenny treatment method, regained the use of her upper body and voice but not her lower body. She would never walk again. In September 1942 she began taking part in radio concerts and, gaining confidence, participated in benefit concerts for polio victims and others. She also did three complete performances of Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* at the Met, seated on a divan. Alas, she was not asked back to the Met and she believed this was due to her co-stars plotting against her because of the attention she received. She did however do three performances of a reclining Isolde in Montreal with Sir Thomas Beecham who considered her 'the greatest living dramatic soprano,' sang Amneris in *Cincinnati* and, in 1947, sang Elektra supported by a platform which allowed her to stand. However, after she contracted polio she was largely confined to singing

concerts. She toured widely in the US, Canada and Cuba and gave many benefit concerts for the war effort, including visiting camps and military hospitals.

In July 1943 she returned to Australia in response to an invitation from the Australian government and toured and gave concerts at bases in northern Australia. She returned to the US and in mid 1945 travelled to Europe and did a concert tour for the Allied troops. In Paris she was reunited with old friends and sang at a gala benefit for 6,000 people. She was awarded the Legion d'Honneur for services to French music. In London she gave a private concert for the Queen and the Princesses and gave a concert at Royal Albert Hall.

In 1949 her autobiography – titled *Interrupted Melody* - was published, ghost written by Charles Buttrose, though she took the credit. The book was extremely popular and was later (1955) made into a film of the same name starring Eleanor Parker as Marjorie, Glenn Ford as Tom and Roger Moore as brother Cyril. This was also a great success.

By 1950 Marjorie's voice was beginning to decline, she could no longer move comfortably between soprano and mezzo-soprano roles and the top of her range was diminished. Her many years of immobility may have required her to compensate for the inability to use the muscles in her lower abdomen. She sang Wagner for the last time on stage in this year. However, she continued to give concerts till 1958 but from 1950 focused on teaching, first individual students, and then in professorial positions in Tulane, Southern Illinois and Arkansas Universities.

She returned to Australia in 1966 to see family and in 1976 when she was asked by an Australian television station to be on *This is Your Life*. She died of heart failure in 1979.

Hers is an amazing story of a girl from Deans Marsh who ran away from home to train as an opera singer, developed her abilities at the Paris Opera and established herself as a principal at The Met before she was 30 years old. It is also a story of a young woman who showed courage and determination when her life fell to pieces around her and who doggedly worked to reclaim her voice so that she could do what she loved – to sing. Opera was her passion and it was a tragedy that her physical afflictions later denied her the joy of taking part on staged opera. Had she not contracted polio at the age of 34 she would have been likely to stand alongside Dame Nellie Melba and Dame Joan Sutherland as an exceptional Australian soprano who became famous on the world stage.

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*Wotan's Daughter*, Richard Davis, Wakefield Press, South Australia, 2012  
*Interrupted Melody*, Marjorie Lawrence, Invincible Press, May 1949  
*Interrupted Melody* DVD, Warner Bros, Archive Collection.