

Extract 1: *The Grass Was Always Browner*

Dad's homecoming I left entirely to Tim. On Fridays these would consist of him standing hand-in-hand with Mum on our front veranda, which was elevated above the street level, not unlike a stage, and when Dad pulled up to park on the verge down by the road, Tim would yell out in his best stage voice: 'Have you got the grog, Dad?' for Fridays were grog-buying night and thanks to Tim the entire neighbourhood knew it. There was nothing Mum could do to curb his enthusiasm, try as she might, and despite the needlessness of his inquiry (Dad always had the grog)...

It was good of our laundry to squeeze in a second toilet, because it had recently been called upon to accommodate a second fridge – chiefly for the purpose of storing Dad's back-up grog. Toilets and fridges are not entirely natural roommates, and indeed the arrangement may well have been illegal. And because of the lack of space in the laundry, when you sat on the toilet, one knee bumped the washing machine and the other the second fridge. This lent a certain rustic quality to the experience, but the advantage of the arrangement was that if you ever overheated whilst sat on the toilet, a not uncommon experience living in Australia, you could reach a short arm out and relieve yourself by the cool of the open fridge door. And while there, you were free to peruse the contents of the fridge, beyond the grog, to consider your next meal while eliminating your last. Some might call that efficient.

Efficient or not, I avoided the laundry toilet for all but the gravest of toilet emergencies, especially at night when the slugs came out. I did not like slugs. Indeed sitting with the slugs I felt was only fractionally better than literally exploding with poo, which is why I put it off until that was nearly the case. The laundry door naturally did not reach all the way down to the concrete floor so it was a free for all for the slugs to come and go as they pleased, congregating around the base of the toilet, possibly because it was inclined to leak. And being Australian slugs they were naturally well fed, and roughly the dimensions of your average-sized seal.

Extract 2: *The Grass Was Always Browner*

...Because no-one else in my family, least of all Auntie Robin, would have been likely to recommend I do ballet. And indeed when Mum took me along to meet the Russian – yes, Russian! – ballet teacher at our local dance school to have my potential for dance assessed, she was highly sceptical too, and quickly took Mum aside to tell her: 'I am sorry, Mrs Jons, but she is not billt for barllet', looking my way with a pitying smile, and speaking with a slightly terrifying accent.

Fortunately Mum was able to impress upon this straight-talking Russian, who was none other than 'Mrs P', aka Tanya Pearson, formerly Tatiana Jakubenka of Moscow and future recipient of the Order of Australia Medal for services to dance, that it was a matter of life and death that I do ballet. But, Mum insisted, she need not teach me how to dance, merely how to breathe a little easier.

And so it was, on this rather more modest basis, without expectation on either side that I should ever learn to dance, that I was accepted into Tanya Pearson's Northside Ballet Academy early the following year...

Standing backstage, waiting for the adjudicator to ring her bell to announce she was ready for the next dancer, dressed as an absentminded professor, I was not feeling entirely confident. Not my usual relaxed self. The dancers backstage had laughed heartily when they'd seen me dressed in character, in such a non-sneering way that it seemed they thought I had given up, which was a little off-putting. But I couldn't blame them; I didn't exactly

feel primed for dancing gold. The adjudicator's bell finally rings. My 'Absentminded Professor' is announced by the convenor and I cringe hearing how odd that concept sounds broadcast to a theatre full of ballet dancers, their teachers and parents, not to mention the all-important adjudicator. But there is no turning back now. I brace myself for the music to launch itself without introduction, relieved at least that the dance is not technically demanding.

When the first note sounds I lunge onto the stage en pointe, wobbling my head to the wonky music, stumbling along the diagonal to finish slightly off-centre. The audience chuckle immediately, which is a bit of a surprise and throws me a little. I should have been expecting it, but I wasn't somehow. Ballet eisteddfods are such competitive environments, especially at the senior level, that the last thing you expect from the audience is laughter, even when you're dressed in a grey wig and stick-on moustache. The laughter makes me want to laugh too, but I know I shouldn't; my moustache might fall off. I do my best to stay in character and maintain a level of composure as I carry on my wonky way and the audience's chuckling turns quickly to full-blown laughter. I am careful not to stare at the adjudicator's writing light glowing in the centre of the dark sea that is the audience, normally the focal point of your presentation. I have decided it would not do for an absentminded character to eyeball the adjudicator. Instead I fix my absentminded gaze somewhere off to the side, and bumble on.

The whole theatre is laughing now, even the girls backstage, who I can see watching me from the mezzanine level where the dressing rooms are, laughing with their mouths wide open. They really must be glad I've taken myself out of the running. I have to bite down hard on my tongue to stop from catching the laughter bug, while struggling to hear the music and remember my steps, which are carefully choreographed to look absentminded but are not in fact absent of mind, as it were. When I fall to my knees and crawl under the old desk, knocking over the test tubes on top (not breaking them) and emerge the other side on my knees, with a befuddled look straight to the audience, I really can't hear the music for the laughter. The walls themselves appear to be laughing. It's a wonder they don't crumble and fall down. Nothing would surprise me now.

I am truly dancing deaf, doing my best from memory to shuffle here, stumble there, pausing with a troubled frown, trying to recall my last genius inspiration (tricky), all without clear musical cues, and feeling genuinely befuddled, which probably adds to the humour of the performance. But the audience has got the serious giggles now and can't stop whatever I do. I could probably do a strip tease and they'd carry on laughing. Perhaps that's not a good example. I am just about biting my tongue off trying to keep a straight face, as even the worry about having lost the music is not enough to make my situation seem anything but hilarious.

Somehow I make my way to the end of the dance that is marked, not by the last note of music, but by the applause that erupts over the top of the laughter that doesn't stop. I stop when I hear it and stand to face the audience, trying to stay in character with a genuinely befuddled look on my face. It is customary to curtsy at the end of your dance – if you're a girl. I just remember in time that today I am not a girl but an old man and should bow instead, which I do with my head at an absentminded angle, which produces more laughter and applause.

Finally, I shuffle off stage into the safety of the wings with some relief, as the laughter and applause continues behind me. 'That was brilliant!' the girls backstage say to me, practically pushing me back on stage to take a second bow. I shuffle back on, genuinely dazed, wondering if the world has gone a little bit crazy. Nobody ever takes a second bow in an eisteddfod and your competitors never tell you 'that was brilliant'...