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DAVID HARTNELL



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DAVID HARTNELL — *behind the Tinseltown facade*

Some 45 years ago (shhh) young reporter HELEN PERRY interviewed then makeup artist and later renowned gossip guru, David Hartnell, MNZM, about his fetish for bow ties. Last month she sat down with him again but the conversation took a very different turn.

To say much has been written about David Hartnell would be an understatement. There are scores of fascinating interviews to be found online so, to compete with a raft of prestigious journalists, was not on the cards this time.

Furthermore, while David may famously profess his “lips are sealed’ mine are not; in fact, it’s a pleasure to recount a morning with him at his Westmere home, an unpretentious house which gives no clue to the mountain of memorabilia inside or its occupants.

It’s seems fair to say, few would guess that it was home to this acclaimed gossip columnist (and his partner Somboon) who has made a career of revealing the lives and secrets of films stars and celebrities from across the world, albeit not too harshly, at least by yesterday’s less than PC standards.

From the first, it was easy to be enamoured by David’s warm welcome and relaxed hospitality. “Tea for you?” he asks convivially. “Yes please, milk no sugar”... “Good.” He nods approvingly.

I love that it is poured from a big teapot wearing a homely cosy, and is served in fine china teacups (no bulky pottery mugs here).

Settling down on a comfy couch in the conservatory, I am struck by David’s virtually seamless complexion - “I’d be too scared to have a facelift which leaves you with a face without expression or movement. I’m going to be 77 in June and we are what we are. I’ve never been precious about my age.”

But in reality, David has never neglected his health or his good looks. Instead, he refers to the skin care regime he first mentioned to me in 1974.

“I never use soap on my face, tepid water only and, of course I use plenty of moisturiser and follow a sound care routine.”

The latter goes for his diet and his general lifestyle, too. “I’ve never smoked or taken drugs, drink only very occasionally — perhaps a Baileys on ice on special occasions — and we eat a fair amount of raw vegetables just because we like them.



“I’m not pedantic about what I eat. I’ll try anything once and if I don’t like it, I don’t have it again, I just eat what I enjoy.”

The conversation switches to his relative proximity to the Auckland Zoo. As I grew up in nearby Francis Street and often heard the lions roaring — the stillness of the night carrying their sound — I ask if he hears them too.

“At four ever morning for a long time but I they’ve been moved and we don’t hear them now; too far away. However, we rely on the Gibbon monkeys for the weather. Once they start shouting I can say with almost absolute certainty we’ll



have rain within 20 minutes.”

Inevitably talk turns to David’s career, the people he has met, the friends he has made — too much for one magazine article and I have no wish to write a history lesson.

Although famed for tittle-tattle, he is warm in his compliments — “the three most beautiful women I ever met where undoubtedly Elizabeth Taylor, Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn.

“The first time I met Elizabeth [Taylor] she was incredibly laid back. She was having her nails done and a wig fitted to match the dog.





David Hartnell.

David Hartnell holds a pack of card's in a solid glass bottle gifted by Master New Zealand magician Mick Peck; items in front from left to right: An award from The Hollywood Chamber of Commerce; A brick from Auckland's former His Majesty's Theatre; A piece from the now removed, Hollywood Boulevard.

Photo Wayne Martin

"As we talked, I picked up a small box on the table and she gestured for me to open it. Inside was the million dollar diamond ring given to her by Richard Burton. Then she casually accepted my suggestion to slip it on her finger as her nails were still wet.

"Never in a million years did I think I would ever see this stunning ring let alone place it on Elizabeth Taylor's finger."

And, like any good journo with an ear to the ground, David also picked up a bit of goss'. He learned that while lunching with the Duchess of Windsor [former American, Wallis Simpson who married Edward V111] Taylor expressed her admiration of the diamond-studded Prince of Wales brooch worn by the Duchess.

"Apparently [Wallis] offered to ask the makers, (prestigious British jeweller, House of Asprey) to make one for Elizabeth, who declined the generous offer as the brooch was intended to be one of a kind.

"I was intrigued at the time but the account has more significance since I saw an episode of *Antique*

Roadshow where a woman produced the only other known Prince of Wales brooch made by Asprey's. It was the prototype for the Duchess' brooch and was also studded with diamonds. I was thrilled to see it."

Building his career as a gossip columnist in an era which saw homosexuality come out of the closet and find global acceptance, David says he has never understood those who focused only on that side on his life.

"Being gay is a pinhead of who I am. I am much more than that. What's more I'm an open book, completely honest about who I am.

"I'm not a vicious writer. I tell it like it is and I like to make people laugh; a lot of what I say, or write, is tongue in cheek; I've never been a Felicity Ferret type of person."

And, people around the world have appreciated David's risqué chat with many of the famous people he has interviewed becoming his genuine friends, among them the late Phyllis Diller, Joan Collins, Barry Humphries (Dame Edna Everidge), Debbie Reynolds, Eva

Gabor and the late American costume designer, Edith Head.

However, he's had his fair share of critics too.

"I've had my photo taken with every celebrity I've ever interviewed so when people suggest I haven't really met this person or that, the photos are my proof, my record, if you like. However, that's often misinterpreted. There are some who accuse me of glory-seeking or wanting to be an actor. I've never wanted to be actor; I'd never remember the lines!"

David also points out that celebs can be two different people. "For example, Bruce Forsyth [the *Generation Game*] was an incredible talent, a lovely man, what you saw was who he was; not so Hattie Jacques or Frankie Howard, they were one person in public, another in private. Most you love, some, well, you don't love!"

However, he says the Tinseltown of the millennium is a very different world from that of the 70's and 80's.

"I don't think I'd like to be starting out as a gossip columnist today

but for those who would brave it, I advise never to disclose anything said in confidence, always go to the subjects themselves, don't listen to hearsay and never approach celebrities in a restaurant or when they're buying a car. Wait until they leave; they'll respect you for that."

As for himself, David says he'd never have got by without his 'little black book' — and, no, it's not the place for his shopping or 'to do' reminders. It's his list of contacts.

"I'm on to book nine" he says of the battered and bandaged book of phone numbers and email addresses which he fiercely protects.

"It's a tool of trade not a licence to betray trust placed in me."

So, true to his oft said word, David is "not one to gossip" except when it's called for! And the best place to read the goss' is in one of his nine books, in particular the very entertaining, *David Hartnell's Hollywood Trivia* or his *Memoirs of a Gossip Columnist* — a fascinating account of his life with, undoubtedly more to come! **See more on page 10.**

POLITENESS, GUMPTION AND A BIT OF SHOE LEATHER!



Above: David receives his Presidential Citation from BAM President Alan Watson; below: David with partner, Somboon.



David Hartnell's great friend, former Happen Inn dancer and entertainer, the late Robert Young once told him: "Never stay in the 17th row of the chorus; always push yourself forward." That advice has stuck, proving its worth throughout David's long career.

However, to document his bold as brass journey from childhood in Mt Albert to the present day would be like trying to keep the cork on a Champagne bottle — it would be sure to explode and an effervescent life bubble over with no chance of catching it all.

Instead, to learn more of this entertaining man — renowned for his 'worst dressed lists' spanning 35 years — and the people with whom he has rubbed shoulders, go pick up a copy of his book, *Memoirs of a Gossip Columnist* — fascinating!

In the flyleaf of my copy, David has written - "a lot of water has passed under the bridge since we first met." Indeed it has.

For instance, the bow ties he was famous for, and the subject of my long ago interview, have disappeared. Instead, David's more likely to sport a cravat or no neck tie at all but he always appears smartly dressed even when 'causal' is called for.

The fact is, there is a lot more to David Hartnell than mere gossip.

Honoured for his services to entertainment with a Member of the Order of Merit, he was born David Segetin. When he was barely four years his father abandoned the family and his son didn't see him again until 17 years later. They met just the once.

"I glimpsed my sleeping half brother and sister and was introduced briefly to his second wife. I never saw my father again but later in life I did build a rewarding relationship with my siblings."

When David's mother remarried

he took his stepfather's surname of Ward but when in London in the late 1960's he changed his name by deed poll to Hartnell.

"It was a fashion name, of course, partly after the Queen's fashion designer, Sir Norman Hartnell and also a great fit as Hartnell's Hollywood."

Despite showing early signs of entrepreneurship, fame and fortune, wasn't instantaneous. It came via early jobs in a hamburger bar and a stationary shop, a talent for roller skating, the allure of magic, a paying drag act and, eventually, a fascination with and career in the cosmetic industry.

Of course, it's easy to see now that hamburgers and stationary were never going to work for the lad who even at school showed a penchant for showmanship.

He confesses his interest in magic (sparked when he saw an Indian magician cut a woman in half with a buzz saw) and his teenage roller skating success were largely based around the show business aspect of both.

He writes in his book:

"I'm a great believer when the red lights on the TV camera go on and the curtain goes up on stage, you perform and when you come off, that's it. I can't stand people who are on 24/7. Save the energy for when you're actually performing."

And, David has showed no end of energy when performing.

He well remembers spending nearly every spare minute at the long-gone roller skating rink at the top of Khyber Pass Road in the city where his flair for the sport saw him win many awards and trophies.

But it was the glamour that really attracted him.

"I was fascinated by the makeup and the looks you could create with

it. We would do outrageous stage makeup, like in *Cats*, but years before anyone else did it."

It was, perhaps this early stage craft allure that later saw him and dancer friend, Robert Young put together a drag act, calling themselves Bob and Dave La Rue, after the British drag artist, Danny La Rue — "we thought it sounded ever so showbizzy!"

Star billing at one of the late Phil Warren's nightclub's, Mojo, led to fun times but eventually the act ran its course although David's friendship with Warren continued until the late entrepreneur's death in 2002.

Of course, there were many new 'acts' ahead for David including his rise to fame as a makeup artist initially with Revlon in Australia, followed by fortuitous journeying to the UK and the USA where, on putting his cosmetic talents behind him he famously worked his way into celebrity journalism by employing, "politeness, gumption and a bit of shoe leather!"

From there, as is so often said, the rest is history, all brilliantly accounted for in his memoirs.

Today, the spotlight still falls on David. Most recently, media sought his comment on the Oprah Winfrey interview with Prince Harry and wife, Meghan but his own celebrity status is balanced by his life with partner of the past 27 years, Somboon.

"I still visit the States frequently but Somboon and I love to escape to our house in Thailand. I'm also heavily involved in my roles as patron of both the Variety Artists Club of New Zealand and the Brotherhood off Auckland Magicians and as an Ambassador for the Prostate Cancer Foundation, the latter in memory of my dear friend, Robert [Young].

"These roles, which I really love, are my way of giving back to the entertainment world. It's been so good to me over the many, many years of my career. People so often take from the entertainment pool but not many give back in the way of charity work. This is my way of saying, 'thank you'."

But both the entertainment industry and the organisations he supports can thank David too — most recently he received a Presidential Citation presented to him by the president of The Brotherhood of Auckland Magicians, (and former Pakuranga resident) Alan Watson in recognition of David's valued contribution to the promotion of the BAM in the media.

Furthermore, this month, David's 'star' will be unveiled on the New Zealand Walk of Fame. "It's a great honour to receive a star on the Walk of Fame although some people do laugh when they see the NZ 'Walk' is in Orewa. But no matter where it is, when voted on by your peers, it is a special event" he says.

And, now, because space has run out, I'll just quote from the additional words David wrote in my copy of his book — "Good times, and bum times, we've seen them all, but my dear, we are still here." So, appropriate.