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*Life Beyond 50*

I'M NOT ONE  
TO GOSSIP,  
BUT...

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# I'M NOT ONE TO GOSSIP

## *The David Hartnell Story*



Just before Christmas we were very pleasantly surprised to receive a call from a real Kiwi icon, Mr David Hartnell.

David relayed to us that on his wanderings before Christmas, he happened upon a copy of *Seasons Magazine* and loved the concept and contents, which gave us all a proud feeling having a media legend praise our magazine so highly.

So, you can imagine the buzz around the office when on top of that call David invited us to his Auckland home for a cuppa, and the chance at an exclusive face to face interview covering past, present, and of course - Hollywood.

Pulling up at David's, the nerves were tingling. But, as soon as the door opened and greetings were exchanged I realised regardless of his rise to fame, meeting David was just like visiting an old friend who you had not caught up with for a while. He put us at ease straight away.

For five decades, David Hartnell, MNZM, has had the good fortune, intelligence, and energy to make a career from introducing not just members of the general public, but some of the greatest stars of the silver screen, in a way that is informative, entertaining and sensitive, with a very sharp sense of humour.

David's talents and achievements range from make-up artist to journalist, gossip columnist, published author of nine books and celebrity in his own right. David has had the privilege to be the Kiwi link to the glitz, glamour and inside stories of Hollywood.

He has rubbed shoulders with famous stars like Elizabeth Taylor, Audrey Hepburn, Liza Minelli, Debbie Reynolds and Lauren Bacall, just to name but a few. Always coining his trademark phrases, "My lips are sealed" and "I'm not one to gossip..."

Today, David (77), and his partner of 30 years Somboon Khansuk, share homes in Thailand and Auckland. Their home in Auckland is only a few miles from where he was born in the later years of WWII, and in his own words was blessed to have seen some of New Zealand's best years.





Abandoned by his father early on, he was brought up by his mother and grandparents. His entry into the world of performance and entertainment come about through magic and roller-skating. The mad craze in the 1950s for roller-skating, an emanation of American culture in which, not long after, he would become immersed. "My second cousins were into roller skating, I once went to see them skate at the championships and was instantly hooked. We would skate at the Delux rink in Khyber Pass, Auckland and I represented New Zealand in the International World Roller Skating Championships in Christchurch in 1959, and came runner-up in the dance pairs."

However, it was another early passion that David informed us about saying "I am who I am because of magic. My grandfather was from Manchester he loved live theatre and as a child he took me to see a magician called Sorcar at His Majesty's Theatre in Auckland. That's where I fell in love with magic and the theatre. I wanted to be a magician. At the age of 11, I joined the New Zealand Society of Magicians as their youngest member ever, and now I'm the patron of The Brotherhood of Auckland Magicians, a title I'm honoured to hold. As Roald Dahl once said those who don't believe in magic will never find it."

David's entry into the world of Hollywood came when he had the good fortune to meet American comedienne Phyllis Diller (1917 - 2012). In 1968 she was in Sydney performing at the Hilton Hotel, entertaining the American military during the Vietnam War, when the American soldiers came down to Sydney for R&R. David had moved to Sydney to work for the cosmetic house Revlon and became Australia's first male in-store makeup artist. He was invited to do Diller's makeup as a publicity stunt and the pair became lifelong friends. "We instantly liked each other, she trusted me as a makeup artist. Through that first meeting Phyllis has opened a lot of doors and introduced me to a lot of people."



Being a New Zealander had its uses with other stars too, including Ed Asner (1929 - 2021) renowned for his performances in the 'Mary Tyler Moore Show' and its spin-off 'Lou Grant'. It also transpired that Ed had an uncle in New Zealand during the war.

Over nearly a half-century, Hartnell has met many fascinating and delightful people. Often via luck, with a bit of good management which found him in the company of some of the brightest stars of the golden years of early cinema. One of the challenges of working with celebrities was fighting his way through their protective shield of agents, personal assistants and other hangers-on.

"They have to justify their existence, so to get to a star you would have to contact their agent and the reply was always 'it's possible or maybe.' You would talk to their Personal Assistant and they'd give you the run-through of what you were allowed to talk about and what you weren't. But then the star would often talk themselves around to whatever you wanted to know anyway." So, David took the opportunities when they arose.

One such opportunity arose when invited to lunch with Edith Head (1897 - 1981), who is an Academy Award winning costume designer. "Before the luncheon, Edith requested that I didn't reveal I was a gossip columnist for reasons that will become obvious, and instead suggested that she introduce me as her New Zealand friend and farmer, which we both realised wouldn't fly and had a giggle about.



At the luncheon Edith's guests were, to my astonishment, Mr and Mrs Alfred Hitchcock, Bette Davis (1908 - 1989) and then Greta Garbo (1905 - 1990), it was Greta's first trip to California in many years. It was a privilege to sit at a table with these people and hear them talk about everyday things, there was no one-upmanship. Show business is an extraordinary business, you never know who you will meet. I was at a BBQ at a private house in Santa Monica when President Reagan arrived, he was so down to earth, and mixed and mingled with everyone."

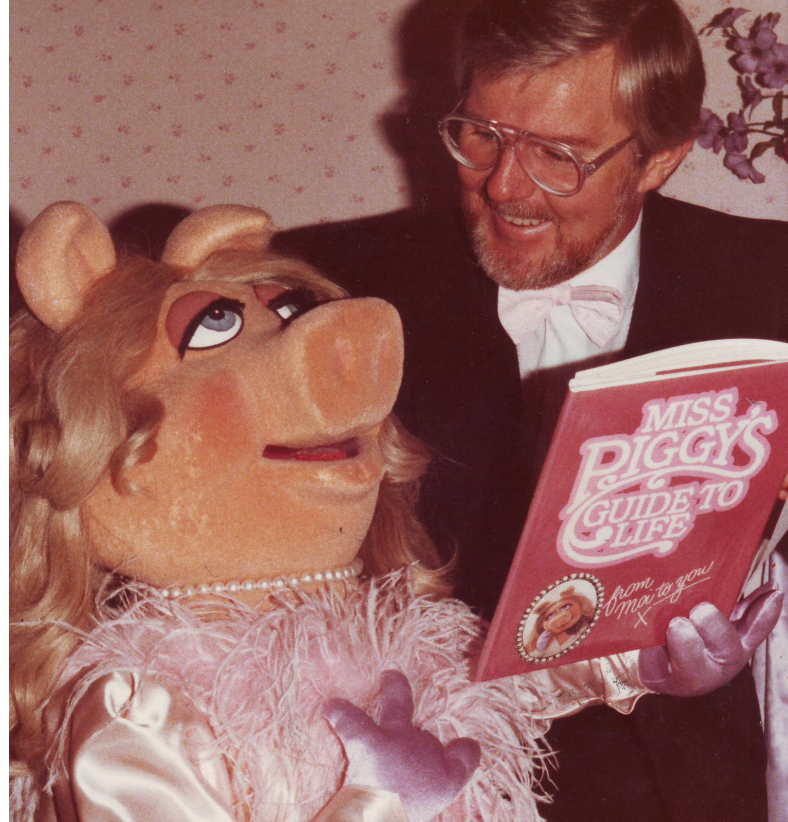
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“Michael Crawford, of ‘Some Mothers Do ‘Ave ‘Em’ and ‘Phantom of the Opera’ was the the nicest man, nothing was too much trouble, and he was a real gentleman.”

“Comedian Ronnie Corbett (1930 -2016) from ‘The Two Ronnies’ was also a pleasure to deal with and became a good friend.”



David has even interviewed the prima donna Miss Piggy. “It was the first time I’d interviewed a piece of felt,” he said. “The story was about how she had written a cookbook and that’s what the interview was really about, however Miss Piggy pushed a waiver form for me to sign before asking any questions, ensuring that I promised not to talk about Kermit. Behind this farce was actor, filmmaker and puppeteer Frank Oz, but after several minutes you completely forgot that Miss Piggy was a puppet.”

David tells us he has a special admiration for Joan Collins, 88, “As a long-time friend I admire her, she’s reinvented herself and she is a survivor.”



“I know Shirley Jones well, she was the mother in the TV series ‘The Partridge Family’. When I arrived for lunch at her house, she had put up a huge sign in the front lawn, saying, ‘David Cassidy doesn’t live here!’ because she was forever inundated by teenage girls looking for her show co-star.”



Then there is the effervescent satirist Barry Humphries, well known for his flamboyant doppelganger Dame Edna Everage. Ten years Hartnell’s senior, Humphries is an icon of Australian entertainment. “Barry and I have been friends for more than 30 years, I don’t look at him as a drag queen as he is not gay, he’s a genius and very clever with his own publicity.”





“A true story that most people are not aware of is that of socialite Richard ‘Fred’ Poncher (who would pay celebrities to come to his parties) purchased the crypt above Marilyn Monroe (1926 - 1962). And when he passed away in 1986, at his request he was turned face-down in his coffin so he could lie on top of Marilyn for the rest of eternity. However, when Fred’s wife Elizabeth passed away, she was placed in the crypt next to him, which funny as it seems, was right on top of Playboy founder Hugh Hefner (1926 - 2017).”



David has other juicy gossip facts such as Ginger Rogers (1911 - 1995), who had her own one-woman show, didn’t mention her long-time dance partner Fred Astaire until the last moment when she held a top-hat on a cane and said “Good night Fred.” Rumour has it they did not get on at all as others surmised.



One unpleasant experience David told us about, was the association with the 5ft 1 inch Mickey Rooney. “He was the nastiest, rudest person I have EVER met. I was getting photographed presenting him with his 80th birthday cake for a magazine story I was writing, he demanded I take my glasses off, he said he didn’t want to be associated with old people. I explained that I’ve worn glasses since I was 14. He said well, hurry up and take the f\*\*\*ing picture so we both did our false Hollywood smiles and he stormed off.”



“People ask me who is my favourite Hollywood star and I always say Mickey Mouse - he’s a Hollywood icon who’s never turned into a Hollywood Rat, never been into sex or drugs, he’s a survivor and he’s always been fun.”



But Tinsel Town is all about image and in Hollywood over the past five decades whilst some things have stayed the same, there have been profound changes in other areas. When it comes to the longevity of stardom, Hartnell is a realist, as soon as a star falls out of favour, or more recently, becomes ‘politically incorrect’, they’re dropped like a hot potato. The casting couch is still in use and female actors, no matter how good, struggle past the age of 40.

David reveals to us that despite the advent of the ‘Me Too’ movement which has led to the downfall of such magnates as Harvey Weinstein, sexism still abounds in Hollywood. “Both men and women are seduced by the power to further their careers. It may have been to get a starring role or even blackmail a studio head for millions. The casting couch, sexual favours in return for career advancement, was always an open secret in Hollywood, I am very sorry to say but it was almost a joke. Back in the 1950s, when Marilyn Monroe was fast becoming a household name, she had the guts to fearlessly address this infamous practice which allowed powerful men victimise female celebrities, including her.”

David’s Hollywood gossip columns have appeared in the NZ Woman’s Weekly, Woman’s Day, the Herald, the Sunday News and several overseas publications. Hollywood is not what it used to be as modern technologies have greatly diversified the options available to audiences worldwide to involve themselves in entertainment unimagined even a decade ago.

The Covid pandemic has also dogged the industry, putting theatres and live venues off-limits and postponing big productions on both the screen and stage.

David is still working as hard as ever in radio, but not in New Zealand. “They say I am too old.” But he is still active on the radio in Australia, the United Kingdom and the west coast of the United States of America. He writes a Hollywood Gossip column once a week which goes out to 196,000 readers and writes the Hollywood Trivia column for the New Zealand Woman’s Weekly, while also undertaking speaking engagements both here and overseas.

Hartnell has travelled widely and after his return to New Zealand in 1975 became involved with TVNZ television shows Town Cryer and Two on One. He joined Radio Pacific and Radio 1 and appeared with radio personality Alice Worsley for nine years. Together they fronted New Zealand’s first ever television shopping show.

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His view is that in New Zealand pay rates for entertainers have lagged behind for years. Many venues would rather use recorded music to save money but in doing so deprive live performers, newbies and veterans of the chance to pursue their careers in the industry. "There's just not the money in venues for the bigger live entertainers anymore. I don't know what's ahead of us. Outlets for local talent, where do they perform now? There are a few clubs, RSA, the Cossie, it's great to have those venues, but if it wasn't for them where would they perform?"

Mr David Hartnell has accumulated a long list of awards and positions over the years, including Patron of the Variety Artists Club of New Zealand, which works to assist rising talent into the entertainment business and acts as a means of 'giving back' to the industry. The Variety Artists Club is a wonderful group of like-minded people who have worked together over the years and include people like Sir John Rowles, Tina Cross, Carl Doy and Tom Sharplin. Again, Covid has had an impact with the Variety Club Annual Awards night which has been postponed twice.



**ABOVE:**  
David Hartnell at the unveiling of his New Zealand walk of fame star.

**LEFT:**  
David's star on NZ's walk of fame in Orewa, Auckland.

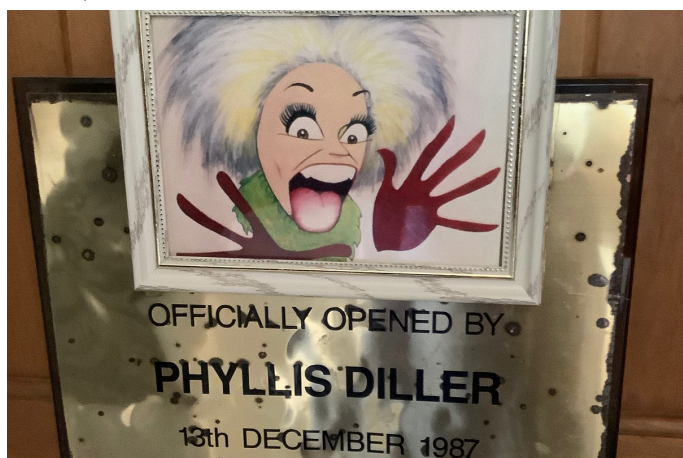
In 2021, David got his very own star on the New Zealand walk of fame, a token gesture of the Kiwi icon status he's achieved.

In 2011 David Hartnell was awarded the New Zealand Order of Merit, for services to the New Zealand entertainment industry, it's believed that he is the first gossip columnist or 'celebrity journalist' to be recognised by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

"I'm still in contact with Hollywood. I still have my little black address book with all the contacts I need, that little black book is worth its weight in gold. People ask me when I'm going to retire, I reply - people only retire from jobs they don't like."



As we finished up this wonderful interview with David, he was in his home office fishing out some key photos for this article, when I noticed a plaque on his toilet door which was given to him by Phyllis Diller. Who had the first privilege of using the ablutions when he purchased one of his former homes, which I found hilarious.



Also I pointed out what seemed like thousands of pictures of David with super stars, presidents, sporting stars, princesses and more adorning his walls, David told me some people might look at it as if he went out of his way to get these photos, when in reality, in those golden years you needed the photos of proof that you had talked with these people, and had the up-to-date gossip straight from the rich and famous themselves, as mediums like Facebook and Twitter didn't exist back then.

The last words to us as we left his home on the conclusion of the interview was to thank us for coming, but until next time **HIS LIPS ARE SEALED!**

Seasons Magazine, myself and my team would like to thank David for his time with us and for showing us his support. We hope to work with David again in the future.



**Geoff Lewis**