

Margaret Fink

# HER WILD, WILD WAYS

Bohemian wild child and friend of the famous and infamous, film producer Margaret Fink talks to **David Leser** about the highs and lows of her amazing life.

**“COME IN, COME IN ...** The house is in mayhem,” shrills the voice from the kitchen and that’s the first thing you notice about Margaret Fink. The voice. At full throttle, it can slice the air like a sharp instrument, a weapon both of attack and defence. Sitting somewhere between an exclamation mark and an officer’s indignant command, it’s also the voice, as one friend notes, of a “five star swearer”. “Can you f\*\*\* it up a bit, love,” she said to Luke Davies, the author of *Candy*, when he was trying to fine-tune the film script. “It’s not dark enough.”

The second characteristic you notice about Margaret Fink is the eyes, a pair of almonds which Patrick White once described as “mosaics of experience”. That was before he wrote them into his novel, *The Twyborn Affair*. “Margaret, I’ve put your eyes into my next novel,” the great author told her one day. “Oh, that’s nice,” Margaret replied. “Yes,” White replied. “They’re the eyes of a transvestite!”

“Patrick loved her,” his biographer, David Marr, tells *The Weekly*. “She gave him lip, but she was sexy with it. He loved her because she was a serious film-maker trying to make good films based on good Australian writing. She was sassy, independent and sharp.”

Margaret Fink has produced some memorable films in her life – namely *My Brilliant Career*, which set Judy Davis and Sam Neill on their international trajectories nearly 30 years ago, and now *Candy*, the acclaimed heroin-fuelled love story which reaffirmed the soaring talents of two more Australasians, Heath Ledger and Abbie Cornish.

In between these two shining cinematic moments, there have been a number of other credible efforts, all of them adaptations from Australian literary works, namely David Williamson’s *The Removalists*, Christina Stead’s *For Love Alone* and Sumner Locke Elliott’s *Edens Lost*.

Next time Margaret Fink makes a film, she might like to think about basing it on her own life. Feminist, atheist, one-time anarchist, artist, stylist, pianist, writer, hostess par excellence and, of course, film producer, there’s surely enough raw material to work with.

The film could start, perhaps, in the pubs of post-war Sydney – places long-demolished now, such as the Tudor, the Newcastle and the Assembly – where a group of intellectuals, musicians, artists, journalists, students and general larrikins, known loosely as the Sydney Push, used to gather to discuss politics, philosophy and the sexual mores of the day.

Among these free-thinking minds and unchained hearts was a precocious, wild-eyed beauty named Margaret Elliott who’d just broken free from her own family to enter Sydney bohemian society. The film could begin with her in one of these pubs, a stylish slip of a thing, smoking Camels, occasionally high on dexedrene (an over-the-counter amphetamine of choice in those days!) and disarming all and sundry – particularly the men – with her sharp wit, athletic mind and come-hither looks.

The film would then go on to trace the life of post-war Sydney and some of its more memorable characters, with Margaret a fixture in nearly every scene. There she would be at 18, a budding art teacher, having just lost her virginity to a 31-year-old returned serviceman (*He knew what he was doing!*), or at 19, falling in love with the poet/philosopher Harry Hooton, a man 25 years her senior and a central figure in the Push.

(Margaret’s straightlaced parents, Dixie and Jack Elliott, would be appalled when their daughter moved into a Kings Cross bed-sitter with Harry, but Dixie – good-natured soul that she was – would eventually buy the couple a double bed!)

Then the film might fast forward five years and Margaret, still with Harry Hooton, would be conducting a wild, clandestine affair with young Barry Humphries, just as Barry’s monstrously satirical creation, Edna Everage, was beginning to storm-troop her way out of Moonee Ponds.

For some early black humour – and there would need to be plenty of it in this film, to capture the central character – Margaret would reveal herself as one >>>

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A magnet for brilliance: Margaret Fink, 73, holds a photograph of herself taken by her ex-husband, Leon, in 1963, when she had just turned 30.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM BAUER.



of Barry's minders while he did battle with the demon drink, particularly one riotous day in 1971 when he went on a bender at Sydney's Gazebo Hotel.

Margaret and Barry would no longer be lovers, but the loving concern would still be there as she walked into his hotel room to find Barry missing, but with all his clothes left behind. "Oh God, no," she'd mutter to herself. "He's at the bottom of the pool." Well, not quite. Barry would be sitting at the front bar, completely naked, having a double whisky with the hotel manager.

And then, after Harry and Barry had departed the scene, there would be marriage to, children with and divorce from Leon Fink, the turquoise sports car-driving property developer, who at one time, according to Germaine Greer, was the

towards Frankie's dying wish – a farewell trip to New York City.

These were parties often held in the grandest of styles – Cole Porter music wafting in off a candle-lit driveway, butlers and French champagne in art-filled rooms, and, of course, an endless hum of conversation, often riotous, but always memorable.

Max Lambert, the Australian composer and musical director, says that most of the stories he could tell about Margaret Fink remain "unsuitable for the Women's Weekly readership". Suffice to say, he has had some of the "best nights" of his life in her home. And mornings, too. "Once, between houses, I lived with her," he says. "For several mornings in a row, I sleepily came downstairs and there was Barry Humphries, the next day, Clive

conservatorium. Afternoons were free for play – in the backyard, but not the front. Sunday mornings were for church, then the long walk home for the family baked lunch, then church again in the evening. "No wonder I broke out," Margaret exclaims now, referring to her rejection of God and her embracing of all that the Push stood for – anti-authoritarianism, sexual liberation and a Socratic search for the truth.

Yet something rubbed off, too, from her artistic parents. Margaret became a fine pianist and art teacher. She learnt to cook and sew and decorate. She developed an eye for beauty that was to then find its fullest expression in the men she loved, the spaces she occupied and the films she would eventually produce.

Today, for example, her Keith Cottier-

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"most upsettingly beautiful man" at Melbourne University. The film might look at this modern marriage, but also at the great sisterly bond forged between these two formidable women – Germaine and Margaret – in young Mr Fink's bed.

"I've just fallen in love with this gorgeous man," Margaret would tell Germaine at their favourite Repin's Café one day in 1961. "His name is Leon Fink." Germaine would literally drop her coffee cup and exclaim, "But he's the guy who deflowered me".

So any film – or story for that matter – about Margaret Fink would have to capture this unflinching talent for spotting brilliance – brilliant lovers, brilliant friends, brilliant actors – and the ability to then bring them into her radiant circle.

"She runs one of the few remaining salons left in the country," says Nicholas Pounder, the former second-hand book dealer and friend to both Barry Humphries and Margaret Fink. "She is a pollinator. Through Margaret, you'll meet actors, artists, authors, journalists, judges, the occasional ratbag ... Somehow, she brings about the best informal brainstorming I've ever seen ... the first rule, of course, being never to be dull."

So you could also make your starting point any one of the celebrated parties for which Margaret Fink has become renowned. The so-called last lunch for Patrick White (where she cooked her signature salmon dish in a fish kettle and did the potato salad not once but twice, just to make sure it was right). The birthday party for Germaine Greer. The dinner for the late journalist, author and rock music writer Lillian Roxon. The 70th birthday party for Sydney couturier Frankie Mitchell, when 120 people gathered at the Finks' Gothic pile in the Sydney suburb of Woollahra to donate money

James, and the third day, Germaine Greer. "I felt like I hadn't woken up and was still dreaming. Of course, this was about 8am and Margaret was fully dressed, had made breakfast and had done 18 other things before that. She was in her 60s then and she used to bound up the stairs two at a time ..."

**AS IT TURNS OUT**, Margaret Fink is still full of restless energy and more. During our three-and-a-half hours together recently, the 73-year-old producer of *Candy* was at once warm, funny, profane, smart, curious, cultured, impatient, generous, aggressively opinionated, modest, egotistical, cheerful and, perhaps most surprising of all, regretful to the point of self-laceration.

Her regrets are noteworthy given that it is a not a word she likes using. "I use it as a pun sometimes," she says. "Mar-regret, instead of Margaret. But I suppose in honesty I do have some regrets. I'm sorry I didn't get more out of my parents."

Both of them, Dixie and Jack Elliot, were fine singers who had met at Sydney's Conservatorium of Music just prior to the Great Depression. Dixie, in particular, could have gone on to become one of Australia's finest sopranos had she not chosen family life instead. "She decided to have four children from the word go," her daughter says now. "Two to replace yourself and two more – that was my mother's philosophy."

The marriage, according to Margaret, was "an unpleasant, bickering affair", with Dixie running the show. No alcohol was allowed in the house and movies were banned because they were considered too vulgar, dangerous or both. (Margaret was 19 when she first saw Jean Renoir's masterpiece, *The River*, the film that changed her life forever.) Saturday mornings were set aside for the study of music at the

designed home – although turned upside down by the house painters – is still a delightful testament to her interests and eclectic style: shelves filled with Baroque CDs and books on film and classical literature; walls covered in oil paintings, wood blocks and her own originals; a kitchen with hanging breadbaskets and various bric-a-brac from around the world; a bathroom of Italian limestone with a bath in the middle and a juliet balcony, all converging on a courtyard with a cumquat and a mandarin tree in the middle, and wisteria climbing into a summer green room.

And all this found inside two converted 19th-century workers' cottages, which Margaret shamelessly wants to expand on. "I'm afraid I covet the third one [next door] because I should have the third one, obviously," she says with the mirth catching in her throat. "You're not meant to covet your neighbour's anything, but I covet my neighbour's house. Shocking isn't it?" And with that she lets out a deep, raucous, self-mocking laugh.

It is this brutal honesty which Jacki Weaver remembers first put her off Margaret Fink when they met more than 30 years ago. Jacki was in David Williamson's play, *The Removalists*, soon to be cast in the movie of the same name.

"She was a force to be reckoned with," Jacki says now. "She took no prisoners ... but all the things that made me a bit guarded about her then are the things I love about her now. There is nothing simpering or mealy-mouthed about Margaret. She is totally honest ... and she has been like that all her life. In fact, her whole life is a beautiful design. There is nothing false or pretentious about it."

Part of this beautiful design, of course, is to be found in her blazing eye for >>>



PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM BAUER.

Margaret at her Sydney home, a "Gothic pile" renowned for parties, often held in the grandest of styles, and attracting world-famous identities.





Leon, Margaret and their daughter, Hannah, who acted as her nanny's flowergirl at her wedding in 1971.

talent. With *The Removalists*, the actors were cast by mutual agreement with director Tom Jeffrey, although Margaret recognised straight away the creative powers of the young playwright, David Williamson. With *Tirra Lirra By The River*, a film based on Jessica Anderson's novel, which Margaret spent 10 fruitless years trying to breathe cinematic life into, she picked an unknown Cate Blanchett for the main role. With *For Love Alone*, which Margaret spent seven years bringing to fruition, she cast a young Hugo Weaving straight out of NIDA for his first feature role.

And, of course, with *My Brilliant Career*, it was Margaret's baby from day one. After being sent a copy of Miles Franklin's famous turn-of-the-century novel in 1965, she immediately bought the film rights – 14 years before the film would be completed.

She then used her own fabric and linen for the set, selected the music (Schumann's *Scenes from Childhood*) and, of course, chose the scriptwriter

*Australian* one morning in bed and we'd been looking for [the] Harry Beecham [character] for years and I saw this photo of this guy [Sam Neill] and I thought, 'That's Harry Beecham'. So I got him to come around to [my house] just to make sure – face to face – that I was right. And I opened the door and there was Harry Beecham, at last."

Based on the story of a poor farmer girl's struggle against society's conventions, *My Brilliant Career* was to pick up a swag of national and international awards, including six AFI's, two BAFTAs (the British equivalent of the Oscars) and an Oscar nomination. According to Margaret, it was her cinematic equivalent of *The Female Eunuch*, the feminist international best-seller which launched her friend, Germaine Greer's, writing career in 1970.

And yet Margaret remains clearly distressed by what she believes is the lack of recognition for her pivotal role in the film. "My *Brilliant Career* is so much my film and I feel really aggravated that Gillian's

**"She's an unusual, fantastic woman and she has an ambience around her ... You can say anything at Margaret Fink's table."**

(Eleanor Whitcombe), director (Gillian Armstrong) and actors. "I went straight to the Paris Theatre [in Sydney]," she says now as excitedly as if it were yesterday, "walked into a rehearsal [where Judy Davis was playing the maid in Louis Nowra's *Visions*] and I saw this girl, and I thought, 'I don't believe it'. Picked her up and took her to Clays Bookshop in Macleay Street, went in and got a copy of *My Brilliant Career*, opened it up, crossed out *My* and put *Your*, signed it and gave it to Judy ... Who knows where the copy is? She bags the film whenever she gets a chance.

"Now with Sam, I was reading *The*

career went like that [pointing skywards] and her bank balance after it ... and I got nowhere. I didn't work again for seven years. And that's because they pick the director ... which is not to denigrate Gillian's contribution. It was vast ... but in Cannes, someone said, 'They've got the wrong girl'. Because they were all after Gillian and I was pushed aside and left out in the cold. And I am a creative film-maker."

**MARGARET FINK** finds it hard to let go. On the plus side, this means she rarely gives up on a project she believes in, even if it takes her a decade (as with

the television mini-series *Edens Lost*) or seven years, as with *Candy*, to see the project realised.

On the plus side, this also means that, in her personal life, she is blessed with innumerable friends, constantly collecting new ones, rarely letting go of old ones, generous to a fault with all. Her friend from Push days, Judy Smith, recalls Margaret learning to become a Double Bay dress-maker back in the 1950s and not just sewing fabulous clothes for herself, but for all her friends as well.

"She made everything she wore," Judy says, "and she looked a million dollars. But she did it for the rest of us, too. Her generosity was astounding. Each of us, when we left Australia, would leave with suitcases full of clothes Margaret had made for us."

And half a century later, one hears the same refrain. Flowers for a friend when he is sick. A warm bed when she's got nowhere to stay. A place at the table when one is hungry – for food, conversation or both. "She understands the perfect pleasure that great hospitality gives," says journalist David Marr. "She's a friend through thick and thin, fame and infamy," echoes Sydney barrister Charles Waterstreet. "She's an unusual, fantastic woman and she has an ambience around her," agrees writer Richard Neville. "That's why we're lifelong friends. You can say anything at Margaret Fink's table."

Richard remembers the funeral two years ago of a mutual friend, Steve Vadim, a White Russian cafe proprietor who used to serve home-made beef stroganoff and white wine to his bohemian clientele back in the 1950s. "When he died," Richard tells *The Weekly*, "nobody remembered him, except Margaret. She was there. She's able to keep the flame burning."

Which brings us to the downside of being unable to let go. Not getting enough kudos for a film such as *My Brilliant Career* is one thing to stick in your craw nearly

30 years after the event. Still harbouring deep regrets about relationships which ended nearly 50 years ago is quite another. Yet that's what Margaret Fink feels with respect to some of the key relationships of her life.

Falling for Barry Humphries while she was still with Harry Hooton still plays havoc with her conscience. Yes, it was a wild attraction to Barry, she admits, but ill-fated from the start.

"The first morning [I was with him in Melbourne], he gave me an order for breakfast. 'I'll have ...' I said, 'Are you kidding?' You see, I was a born feminist. Miles Franklin was a born feminist. >>>



Abbie Cornish and Heath Ledger in *Candy*.  
Left: Margaret (centre, back row) on the set of 1979 film *My Brilliant Career*, with director Gillian Armstrong (left), Sam Neill and Judy Davis (right).

## “And that’s why Barry [Humphries] and I were doomed from the word go – because of my independence and feminism ...”

Mary Wollstonecraft was a born feminist. I didn’t need *The Female Eunuch* to tell me. In fact, you know, the Push and a lot of things Germaine might have picked up from me could have helped inform *The Female Eunuch*.

“And that’s why Barry and I were doomed from the word go – because of my independence and feminism, because of my atheism and eccentricity ... and because of his right-wing views, set in cement. At 23!”

Nonetheless, she continued to see Barry in secret while living with Harry – until Harry found out and “kidnapped” Margaret. “Look the Harry, Barry, me thing goes on and on and on and on and on and on,” she continues, letting out a howl of anguish in the process. “Argghhhhhh ... You know ... I’ll never know anyone like Harry. Never ... Oh, dear,” she says, those astonishing eyes of hers now moist with tears. “And I just loathe the idea of causing him [Harry] heartache. Really loathe it.”

Harry Hooton died in 1961 and Barry Humphries and Margaret Fink’s friendship foundered recently when Margaret was quoted describing Barry and his politics in most unflattering terms. “He’s just wiped me,” Margaret says. “That’s the finish of our friendship and I’m sorry about that.” Although, perhaps, not surprising, given that Margaret also denounced his politics to me during our interview, not to mention the politics of painter Margaret Olle and those of her brother-in-law, controversial historian Keith Windschuttle.

All of which confirms writer Luke Davies’ view of Margaret as a woman with a rather startling – and refreshing –

candour. “I love her outspokenness,” he says, “her hilarious biting wit and, dare I say it, when she chooses to get into the realms of character assassination, she’s a lot of fun. She’s incredibly opinionated.”

Margaret also carries sorrow about her 17-year marriage to Leon Fink, a man she still adores. Together, they share three children – Hannah, a writer, John, a documentary maker, and Ben, a guitarist formerly with The Whitlams. “Leon’s a fantastic man,” she says. “He’s original ... I think he’s a prince. He’s a very, very good man. Funny and wayward, but he gets what he wants.” How do you look back on the marriage? I ask her. “With regret,” she replies, without hesitation. “It was the 1970s and I think it’s fair to say we were both experimenting.”

After Leon “pissed off” – to use Margaret’s parlance – she then fell for the hell-raising criminal-turned-playwright, Jim McNeill. “He really was a handful,” Margaret offers. “Like a lot of criminals, very right-wing ... and once again a clinical genius [like Harry Hooton and Barry Humphries].” Yet he was also a violent drunkard who laid into Margaret one day after she refused to continue their relationship. She managed to escape the apartment bloodied and bruised.

And then, in the ensuing years, there were many other lovers, even during menopause when Mother Nature might have been urging her to take a well-earned rest. “I was having a wonderful love affair [during menopause] and my theory there is that it probably assists your hormones and gets them working away.”

At 73 and with “half a facelift” to help

herself look 15 years younger, Margaret Fink is still “hunting for treasure”, as her friend Richard Neville likes to put it. Not so much in the area of romance as in the area of work and people. Her peerless eye for talent found its target with *Candy*, first with the initial reading of Luke Davies’ book and then with her choice of actors (Heath Ledger and Abbie Cornish), director (Neil Armfield) and editor (John Collier).

Then, more recently, she was able to zero in on the considerable skills of new playwright Tommy Murphy when she visited Sydney’s Stables Theatre to see his latest work, *Strangers in Between*. “I went to this theatre and I thought, ‘Oh Christ, this is the best theatre I’d heard since early Williamson. Who wrote it?’ ‘Tommy Murphy.’ ‘Never heard of him. Who is he?’ Found out, met him ... he’s recently won the [NSW] Premier’s Award for best playwright.”

And now the two have teamed up to work on a new project tentatively called *Eugenia*, about a woman who lived as a man in the first third of the 20th century. “Oh it’s a fabulous project,” Margaret cries with undimmed enthusiasm. “Just fabulous. I’m so excited about it.”

And let’s hope it gets up for Margaret’s sake. Yet if, for some reason, it doesn’t, there’s always the one about the feminist film producer who lived the life of an artist in post-war Australia, forever thumbing her nose at convention, turning a gleaming eye towards beauty and truth, and speaking out with that boisterous, singular voice of hers, “*Can you f\*\*\* it up a bit, love ... it’s not dark enough*”.