

50 Years of the Stables Griffin Theatre Podcast Series

Episode Seven: *Going Solo with Paul Capsis*

In this episode of the 50 Years of the Stables podcast series, Australian theatre stalwart **Paul Capsis** talks *Angela's Kitchen*, and reveals the emotional perils of writing and performing the deeply personal story of his family and his Maltese roots.

Hosted by:

AC - Angela Catterns

Guests:

PC - Paul Capsis

Angela Catterns: *2020 marks the 50th birthday of Griffin Theatre Company's home: the SBW [sic] Stables Theatre. I'm Angela Catterns. Join us as we celebrate the anniversary in this special series of podcasts, where we'll hear about the theatre's history and talk to some of the country's most celebrated artists.*

Angela Catterns (AC): In 2010, Griffin Theatre Company presented *Angela's Kitchen*, starring cabaret performer Paul Capsis. It was an evocative and beautifully staged piece of autobiographical theatre and was the smash hit of that year. Paul Capsis welcome to the Stables Theatre 50th anniversary podcast series.

Paul Capsis: Hello Angela, and happy 50th anniversary to the Stables.

AC: This was a very personal story wasn't it?

PC: Very personal. The most personal work I have ever performed in my entire life and career- *Angela's Kitchen*.

AC: Who was Angela?

PC: My darling grandmother. My maternal grandmother. My Maltese grandmother who raised me in Surry Hills. Before Surry Hills became trendy.

[Laughter]

AC: So, you played multiple characters in this piece?

PC: Yes, I played my grandmother, my grandfather, my mother, my aunty, brother, cousin, myself. *[laughter]* I think there were a few others? *[laughter]* There was a scene around a kitchen table, which I improvised when I did the workshop with Julian Meyrick, who is a masterful director.

AC: Let's talk about how the story came about, I know at the time you were a singer. What kind of singer were you? Singing what kind of songs?

PC: Mostly cabaret, I fit more into the cabaret sphere. I have a background in theatre, but I have ended up.... As Julian said to me one day, "You are a cabaret star who is really a character actor," or

something like that. My history with Julian goes back to the eighties when I was an actor and had given up on the idea of being a singer, because I had tried to be with bands, and I was too strange. So, I gave all that up. I ended up doing a lot of fringe with Julian in the early eighties.

AC: So, tell us about Julian Meyrick, he's a director and theatre historian I understand?

PC: That's right. I met him around 1986, I was doing a cabaret show in the city and I met him after the show. He came up to me after the show and said, "I want to work with you, I think you are a character actor and I would love you to join my company Kickhouse." I was with him and his company for a number of years. Through him I met Louise Fox, who is an actor and performer with the company, which Julian was directing and leading. I also, through Louise, met Barry Kosky. So there are all these interesting connections.

AC: So, Julian cast you in your first professional theatre role at *The Stables*, is that right?

PC: That's right, he did. It was show called *Grace Among the Christians*, by Luke Devenish. Louise Fox was in that and several other wonderful actors as well. I played Jonathan Christian. And it was wild piece, an Australian original piece about a Christian family and it was at the Stables and I remember the proximity of the audience to the performers. I was sort of starting out back then. I had been with Shopfront Theatre in Carlton for five years and then I stepped out of that and into the world of Fringe. Fringe or fringe theatre and that's what Julian's company Kickhouse was. I remember we would get changed and there were so many of us with so many weird costumes. We would get changed in a house on Womerah Avenue and walk up dressed as these demented Christians to the theatre, to the Stables, because the dressing room was so tiny. *[Laughter]* We performed that piece, and it got a very interesting reaction from the audience.

[Laughter]

AC: So, it was Julian's idea that you develop a stage production about your family and your grandmother, and Maltese heritage. Did you think it was a good idea at the time?

PC: No, I rejected the idea the first time.... I was doing *Rocky Horror* in Melbourne and been with them for a year. I got this beautiful card delivered to the hotel in Melbourne from Julian Meyrick with the idea of doing a play about my grandmother Angela, who he had met and had discussions with. There was a period I was in Melbourne doing something, I can't remember what, and he was staying in my place in Sydney and there was a thing with the key, picking up the key from my grandmother Angela. So, he (Julian) would go and have a cup of tea with Angela, talking about the war because his father, Julian Meyrick's father was also involved in the war in Malta. He knew all the history, and so there was a lot of discussion with Angela. So, when he approached me with this beautiful card to do this play, Angela had only passed, I think it was six months....

AC: She had died, six months earlier.

PC: She had died about 6 months earlier. She died August 2007, and I got this card at the end of 2008. So, it wasn't, for me it wasn't very long and the idea... I thought I could never stand on the stage and talk about my grandmother, because that would be too much for me.

AC: Too personal.

PC: Too personal and too upsetting, I think. But the thing was, in the card Julian talked about her, but he talked a lot about migration and that it was an important story, it was an Australian story. He

had taken the idea to Nick Marchand, who was artistic director at Griffin Theatre Company at the time, and Nick was keen to give us a workshop. I called Julian and said “thank you for the beautiful card but I don’t think I can.” He said, “That’s okay, think about it. Take as long as you need. The offer is there from Nick.” He then talked about how the play wasn’t just to be a personal play, but one about migration, an Australian story, my connection with my grandmother. I think about another six or seven months went by and I thought about it a lot. It was interesting because it was the politics of the idea, that really drew me to it and to say yes. It’s interesting, you know, there are a lot of Maltese in Australia that have migrated, and I don’t recall ever hearing their stories. So that’s what drove me primarily to say yes to the idea.

AC: And what was the process then of bringing *Angela’s Kitchen* to the stage?

PC: Well then then Nick Marchand made it possible for to sit in room for a week. Julian the director, collaborator, writer, had the idea of having a week workshop, with me in the room, with my actual artefacts, my grandmothers things that I have, and all the photographs, my Malta collection from when I was a child. That’s the other part of the play, and what drove Julian was to talk about my obsession with the place of my mother’s birth and my grandmother’s birth. I was an obsessed child, about Malta. I was strange kid, I didn’t really find Australia very interesting, I just had all these stories from other places all the time. Malta stories from my grandparents, mum, aunts and uncles. And then there was the Greek stuff from my dad, and the Egyptian Greeks and their stories. I spent a lot of my time with grandparents, so I was a very interested child, I wanted to know these stories... “What was the weather like on the day of bombing?” It drove my grandmother, Angela. I think Julian also knew that because I’d known him for such a long time and had told him all of these stories. So, I came in with this huge collection of things...

AC: What were the things? Some of them?

PC: There were original postcards that I collected from 12... around 10 actually, or 9 maybe. I think that’s when I became obsessed. And I had to have every photo, because I was obsessed. I would collect things, even from Maltese strangers, I would go, “Do you have any calendars, old postcards?” They would think, “This child is so strange, they know more about Malta than I do”. I still have them, I’ve still got all those things. I brought them in and then Julian made me do a number of exercises, mediations, and constantly recording me with a tape recorder. He would say, “Okay close your eyes and remember that first trip to Malta, in 1986 when you were 22 and just go on a walk...” I used to do a lot of walks. I walked everywhere. I found my grandmothers old house, on my first day, walking from St Julian’s though Sliema to Gzira, where my grandmother lived, walking walking, and found the house. So, I described as much as I could remember, and I had a very vivid memory of the place. Because I had studied Malta as a kid and throughout, I actually found it really easy to navigate... I mean it’s a small island, but I was very familiar with structures and streets.

So, during the week of doing that [workshop], it was cathartic at the end of that because by then I was still grieving and missing my grandmother, greatly. But we were in a bit of turmoil with the family unfortunately; the family went through a bit of a difficult period and it healed and helped at the end of the week. And Julian always put the proviso that, if I was not comfortable or if it got too much or it was too overwhelming, and I couldn’t do it, that it was okay that we did the workshop. That was important. And if it goes further, but you know I always had to keep Julian and inform him about what I am feeling about this process. I think a lot of it had to do with my history with Julian, my trust in Julian, and the fact that Julian had a connection with my grandmother, Angela. For me to go into a personal part of my life, I had to have that trust. I had never really done that in my work, in fact it was the furthest thing from me as a performer. I always wanted to bury myself in other worlds and characters but not my own. I say to people I came out as a wog to the world, as a Maltese. Cos I

dunno, I guess I think I always a bit of a mysterious cabaret performer-thing, channelling Janice Joplin and Judy Garland and all the dead ladies, Billie Holiday.

AC: So, a script evolved from that process?

PC: So, Julian went away after that week and transcribed *every single thing* that I said. Can you imagine? The torture. There was huge pile-

AC: A huge pile of papers?

PC: Yep a huge pile of papers. So, then he looked at all that. He took huge chunks of dialogue and formed parts of the play. Also, Hilary Bell was involved.

AC: She worked on the script?

PC: She worked on the script. Julian wanted the shape of the piece to evolve but not lose my voice. He said "We have to have you as you speak." Not in theatre way, in how I would speak like on the tapes. There was an improvisation I did in the workshop, around the table he said to me, "Remember when you were ten or so, where was your grandfather? Where was your grandmother?" Because people tend to sit in the same place. That's what usually happened in my family people sitting in the same place. Mum here, Grandpa here, me here, brother opposite me and Grandma never sat down. Always hovering....

AC: Or in the kitchen?

PC: Hovering around the kitchen table. And I improvised something, and I went into these characters, which I had done before in other shows. Like the style of two characters talking to each other, like Judy Garland talking to Liza. [switching characters] "Judy! Liza! Mama!" Doing this kind of weird-and I did this with my family. I just got lost in the improvisation and Julian recorded it. That improvisation remained in the piece from its inception to the last performance. It didn't change.

AC: How long did it take before you reached the stage of rehearsal for the production?

PC: I think it was a year and half. There were a lot of meetings and when I was in Melbourne or doing something we would go to Julian's. There was one time we sat down with Hilary but mostly it was me sitting in Julian's kitchen in Melbourne, and reading. It was interesting, there were things that I read that I said, that I was like, "I can't say that." Certain things were too much, too personal, too much. There were some things I balked at and Julian encouraged me to keep going with it, because he wanted there to be this conflict I guess, or a darker side of things, in this story. Then we rehearsed.

AC: There were a lot of props and technical features? What were they?

PC: Julian's partner Louise McCarthy is a great theatre, film/television designer. When I brought in the original things like the crocheted blanket my grandmother put on her legs or used to lean on at the table. Well she said we can't have any of those original things, everything will have to be replicated. Including books, things that I used. All the cutlery and all the things were from thrift shops. Also, she did this clever thing of creating the skyline of Malta using kitchenware. Which I used in the play to describe the bombings. She designed this cupboard, and think she made it as well. Also, the kitchen table which acted as the bag, at the end of the piece when my grandmother is on the boat from Malta. Which I fold up. It was incredible.

AC: I understand Sam Strong, who came on as Artistic Director at Griffin at that stage.

PC: That's right Nick had left, and Sam Strong came on as the Artistic Director through the whole two seasons. The 2010 season was rehearsed in an office in the city in George Street, it was like an old bank. I remember we had the entire floor. Then of course I was confronted with the learning of this massive dialogue, monologue, piece with no singing. Also, in recalling those stories and those walks. Then the family stories. It was technically difficult and a little bit painful to learn it. Once I had learnt it, I think it was possibly a week before the first performance at the Stables, then the emotion hit, once I had learnt it. I hadn't been affected by it until... I mean I was when I read it around the kitchen table with Julian and Louise. The performing of it then was the tricky part.

AC: Were you worried that no-one would be interested in your story?

PC: I was, I was the person saying, "This is silly. What are we doing? This is nuts!" I think the first season was six weeks. I said, "You have got to be joking, *who* is coming?!" Was it a month? I thought, "No-one is going to come." Yeah I was really worried and didn't believe it. Then the opposite happened.

AC: So, tell me what did happen? Do you remember the opening night?

PC: I do. My mother was there and I was very nervous for my mother to hear those stories.

AC: What was her response?

PC: She didn't have much of a response.

AC: She wasn't moved?

PC: She didn't say much. She just said: "Yes, that's what happened." I think that's what she said. Not much! But my mother doesn't say much, about my performances. Because some Maltese are very superstitious, and my mother doesn't like to say positive things in case the opposite happens. It's an old Maltese thing, that my grandmother Angela had as well. Not to that extent. But she had a thing about drawing the evil eye. *[Laughter]*

AC: So, tell me more about opening night, so your mum was there, it was a full house.

PC: Yes, full house. We had done the previews. I was very nervous. I'm always nervous, it doesn't matter what I do, I'm very nervous. I also felt exposed, because I didn't have anything to hide behind, also I didn't wear make-up. I wore a very simple "street-wear" really. Louise had me in a very, very simple, easy to walk around on the stage and nothing restricting, but very me, outfit on the stage. At the end I wear a dress, which was to represent my grandmother. At the end wear gold earrings and a little bit of lipstick. My grandmother never wore, and I don't ever remember her wearing lipstick. So it was very, very simple in the way that I looked, so I felt as I was telling this personal story... There was a part of me that thought why on earth would anyone be interested in my story? So, I always had to remind myself of Julian's premise of doing it, which was that "It's about this Australian story about migration, Malta you're your connection to it and your grandmother". I would have to remind myself of that when I got the feeling of "Why am I doing this? This is nuts!"

[laughter]

AC: Paul can you remember any of the lines? Would you be able to share with us a tiny little bit of dialogue from that play?

PC: I should remember the opening because the last time I did it was 2017 in Malta.

AC: Oh really?

PC: Yeah, we did a season in Malta. We finally got to Malta, after many attempts and near misses. We got there in the end.

AC: What was that like?

PC: Extraordinary, very emotional. Every show I broke down, because to me that was beyond imagination, for me to tell my grandmother's story in her country. She always had that strong connection to Malta, she never lost it, even though she never went back. She left in 1948, but never went back because she was terrified.

AC: What an extraordinary turn your career has taken.

PC: Indeed. It was beyond... it was just... incredibly emotional, I mean as I said I broke down every show. Just the thought of my grandmother knowing- If she were alive it, for her it would be so incredible. Although I don't think, knowing her as well as I do, I don't think she wouldn't have liked her story being told because she was very modest and very private. That was another thing, that was a part of my concern about my mother too, because I'm telling these stories about my family. They weren't keen on telling people... your own family that's fine but not outside your family. It was very difficult. I had interesting reaction from other Maltese, and because I did that, they would be a little bit hostile or shocked. There was a lot of shame being projected. I remember one woman coming up to me in the first season. I had so many interesting conversations with people in the foyer in Griffin.

AC: Members of the audience?

PC: Members of the audience in the foyer after the show.

AC: So, one woman came up to you?

PC: One woman, came up to me, and she said, "How could you show your grandmother sweeping the floor, cleaning?" For a moment I was dumbstruck and shocked. But then I also got it and understood where she was coming from with it. I also had pride in my grandmother, for being the hardworking courageous woman that she was. For me it was that, "Oh well I don't agree". It was interesting how audience members projected their stuff onto the show. Incredible emotion, there was a lot of emotion in the audience. People sobbing, laughter, and identification. There were truck loads, busloads of Maltese coming to the theatre, that was extraordinary.

[laughter]

AC: Fantastic. So, I guess you are familiar to being on stage alone being a musical performer. Was it like that, presenting a dramatic play by yourself, solo?

PC: It's interesting Angela, because I never felt alone in that show. It's weird. I had my grandmother's voice: when I was playing her, I could hear her. It was a great comfort but also

painful. So, I didn't feel alone. Every night I would think "Oh boy, I've got this massive journey to go through tonight. I have to go to all these places." There were a lot of places in the piece, dark and funny ones. Very emotional. I had some nights in the first season and especially in Malta where I broke down and it got harder for me. So, in 2012 when we revised the show, it got harder because I missed my grandmother more. I still do more than I did before. I think that's thing about grief.

One night at Griffin, there was an elderly couple who knew my grandmother, in the 2010 season and that was one of the most difficult shows that I have ever done. They sat in the front row, husband and wife. My grandmother knew them well, even talking about it now... I'm getting... But they just sat there beaming at me. A lot of people, my generation Maltese, were affected by it, because they also spent time with their grandparents. I remember one night a woman in the audience sobbing so much that she couldn't leave the theatre afterwards. She was still there, and because I took so long to get out of my dressing room, they said, "There is a woman sitting at the back and she is beside herself." I said, "You must bring her in, I have to talk to her." She was very emotional and said, "I had the same connection with my grandmother, and she passed not long ago."

There was one night where a woman in the front row, fifteen minutes into the show, doubled over with her head in her lap, sobbing. The thing about it was, when I looked at her she looked like my cousin Margie. She resembled her so much and I thought, "She is definitely Maltese." She might even be related! And she was very effected by the play. She stayed like that for the rest of the play. I was a little obsessed with her.

There were nights where I was drawn to certain people, just because of that incredible magical space of the Stables. You can hear them breathe you know when the audience is with you. Moments when it's hysterical, and sad. It's very difficult to escape it, and difficult to not be affected by the audience as a performer. I remember rushing out into the foyer wanting to find this woman, I wanted to wonder what was going on. Her husband who was sitting next to her, was there, and I said, "Where is that woman?" and he said, "She has just gone to the bathroom, she was just so affected by your play". I said, "I know, she's Maltese." He goes, "No she's Brazilian, but it was her mother's story." Everything the same. So that was an interesting thing.

AC: Do you think performing in the Stables theatre intensified the whole performance for you?

PC: Oh, yeah. It was intense. When I had a sprinkling of Maltese in the audience it always made a huge difference to the performance because there was a lot of Maltese spoken in the show. The reaction and identification not just Maltese, Greeks, even Irish people really related to this show. The Catholic, the big families, the shouting. I remember one night another Maltese woman came up to me and said, "All that shouting and yelling that's why my father migrated from Malta to England and took us to boarding schools. He hated all that stuff about the Maltese." *[laughter]* I think the second season, they did a community show, that was a wild, unhinged show. One woman said, "What's this shit? I don't want to hear this crap!" Walked out and stomped out. People talking. I will never forget that night. I got angry! I thought, "This is my personal story, how dare you." Because to me it was like, you're doing that to my grandmother. Not do me, you're doing it to my family!

AC: Do you like that place a fondness for that theatre?

PC: I do. It will forever be the most special place to me. Because there were a lot of shows, and a lot of incredible things happened there. I have such vivid memories of the opening night when William Young came backstage, and Hilary was there, and Julian. It is history for me, such a strong connection with Hilary going way before I even met Julian. And so, it was like my family, because I feel like Julian Meyrick and Hilary Bell are my family, you know my theatre family, which is more of a

family in 2019 than whatever I had... I mean for me, when my grandmother passed, Angela, it was the end of my family. It was the end of that. My mother, and brother I still have. And you know because it was focused on the Maltese side of my heritage, the Greek side wasn't really represented. It was interesting, when my dad came, that was a difficult show, because clearly for my father to sit there and see me talk about my Maltese side and really barely mention the Greeks, you know. That says a lot. And he didn't have a lot to say about it. Except to say, "I didn't know you could speak Maltese." [Laughter]

It's an interesting question about aloneness. Because there are plays I have done and things I've performed I have when I have felt incredibly alone. In the days when I used to do shows with backing tapes, or doing Barry Kosky's show in Vienna, I had a band. There were a number of things I performed - *The Little Bird* in Adelaide - where I would again have a band. You would go to theatre, and the band are tuning up, but you're in the dressing room, getting into the zone. And getting into the zone for me usually encompasses make-up and preparation, mediation, prayer. And going into the zone is a very important thing for me. For me, the dressing room is very sacred, and I don't like people going into the dressing room before or after the show. I have a thing about it. I just don't like it. A lot of performers do and want people in there, to talk and to mingle but I don't want people there, only people who are involved in the piece: the director, writers, stage manager. Other than them I don't want anyone there.

And I also created a shrine in the Griffin I remember, in that gorgeous tiny dressing room with pictures of my grandmother and family, and Malta. I still have them all in a box from the dressing room, and my scripts which are totally worn and shredding. They're all there, in every dressing room where I perform. But particularly that theatre and particularly the Griffin, because of the way I felt the audience.

You just can't escape that, that intense feeling of an audience. One of my favourite other places to perform was when we toured it in its second season was the Paramatta Theatre, because a lot of Maltese went. They were wild! They were talking to me and each other, and singing, that was extraordinary. One time in Canberra in the Street Theatre, a Maltese woman told me to stop! She said, "Stop now, that's enough." I ran out looking for her, but she had left. I was so interested in her story. I wondered if I imagined it, telling me to stop and glaring at me in the show. There were a lot of interesting experiences with the play! And reactions were very similar in Malta to that of Griffin. The St James Cavalier was very tiny and they were around me, similar, it was a square though. In Malta they were all talking, and it was hilarious!

AC: Fantastic. Paul thank you so much, it has been a delight to speak to you.

PC: Thank you Angela.

AC: Thanks for listening to Griffin's special podcast series, where we are celebrating 50 Years of The Stables. For more anniversary activities head to Griffin's website: griffintheatre.com.au

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*The 50 Years of the Stables podcast series was produced by **Margaret Murphy**, hosted by **Angela Catterns** and recorded & edited by **Diamantina Media Group**.*

*Transcribed by **Poppy Tidswell**.*