

Debbie Dorday

See you at Burgundy's

Debbie Dorday is the personification of British Music Hall. I'd always assumed that she was a dancer but her true forte is comedy. Many of her monologues were written for her by 2000 Benny winner Doug Ashton, Billy T. James straight man. And she is bloody funny; try and get a chance to see her and Jim Joll in their show, appearing at a retirement village near you soon!



Debbie Ann Clougher was born in Matching, Hartfordshire in England on 18 October to Ann Clougher (b. Lleufer-Thomas), the daughter of Sir Daniel Lleufer-Thomas, a Welsh high court judge, social reformer and writer. Debbie's father was the Rev. Sergius Clougher, an eccentric Anglican minister and farmer, born in Wales and brought up in Tasmania and New Zealand. He was an assistant curate in Tasmania for five years then studied in England at Keble College in Oxford while assistant curate at St Mary the Virgin, the University Church. He must have had the priesthood in his DNA; his parents Rev. John Clougher and Constance Maude were missionaries in Papua New Guinea and built a school there. Constance was a Richardson, the Welsh shipping and copper trading family, which developed the Swansea docks. When her first husband died she married his older brother, John, and when he died from pneumonia in 1904 she left her family in Tasmania and

travelled alone to Port Moresby, then into the mountains, to finish his work. In 1907 she wrote a booklet about her adventures in New Guinea called *A Peep behind the Scenes*.

Although she owned a deep booming voice Constance also had a beautiful singing voice and played piano well. She took the piano everywhere, even to New Guinea where she soon recruited dozens of fascinated children to the new school. On her return she took her family to Nelson and developed a farm in the Korere Valley. Debbie's brother Johnny was 9 years older than her and developed a love of the sea, eventually building a kauri yacht and writing a biography about the experience, called *The Creation of Cloah Sark*.



Sergius was an Army Chaplain in the Middle East during the war and finally got to meet his son when Johnny 5 years later. He moved the family to New Zealand and took up a post at St Philips Anglican Church in Mission Bay, Auckland. Five years later he took a series of parishes throughout the country. 'We milked cows in Nelson and Coromandel then we lived in a shack with no electricity in the King Country for a while. We got the water from a stream and rode to school on a horse. Father cared about those who lived in difficult circumstances and refused to live in flash rectories. Whenever he did make any spare money he would send it to the New Guinea Mission.' In eight years Debbie attended 10 schools and although dealing with constantly having to make new friends and familiarise herself, her love of dancing kept her focused.

'We went back and forward between here and England a number of times.' It soon became clear that she had talent so at each new town her mother would seek out a ballet school and arrange lessons.



Sergius' passion was the *Hamilton Cathedral* and they lived in a number of Hamilton suburbs, farmed in Te Rapa and finally settled in Ngaruawahia. It was here that the family met travelling showman Bill Starr. Sergius became fascinated with Bill's rope twirling act and Bill gifted him a set of ropes and taught him the routine. Later Debbie joined the act dancing in and out of the spinning lasso and she and her father put on a charity show for the cathedral.

When she was 9 her parents returned to England and arranged an audition with *Sadler's Wells Ballet School* in London but when her mother heard about the *Ada Foster Stage School* she booked an audition there as well. 'My father never found out. I wasn't deceiving him; I just didn't say it was different from the one he thought.

I ended up there for seven years and learned the whole business; singing, comedy, falling down stairs without breaking your neck.' The school had 65 pupils and was also an agency so Debbie paid for the schools high fees by doing TV, film work and modelling. The camera loved her freckly face, long curly red hair and childlike looks and plenty of parts were offered to her. She got work on numerous movies; the *St Trinians* and *Carry On* series, Cliff Richard films and *Waltz of the Toreadors* with Peter Sellers. After acting in a play about the war she decided she'd rather work in Variety. 'We were 14-year-olds hiding from the Germans and the others girls were trying to get me to laugh and I forgot my lines. It really upset me and I was scared that I would get the dries again. It was so nerve-wracking.' Debbie recalls being accompanied by a chaperone for filming at television studios then having to complete three hours of schoolwork a day.



London's *Windmill Theatre* had been home to many great British comics such as Tommy Cooper, Jimmy Edwards, Peter Sellers and Tony Hancock but times were getting tough. At 15 she joined the company doing comedy with music-hall comedian Arthur English but left after 3 months. Arthur later became well known as the policeman in *Dad's Army* and Mr. Harman the rude maintenance man in *Are You Being Served*. The *Windmill* closed its doors in 1964.

'Living in London in the swinging 60s was fabulous. I was a high fashion Mod wearing the Mary Quant little girl look; baby doll dresses with tights and long boots. We also enjoyed a huge make-up paint box with eye liner, eyelashes and pale lips. The West End was really safe then; we would happily to travel home by tube train after a show. I'm not sure you could do that now.'

Debbie found gigs around London then headed for France where she was accepted into the *Moulin Rouge Company* in Paris and spent two years touring Europe performing in a new city every 2 weeks. Charles Aznavour, Edith Piaf's protégé, was starring in the show at that time. Debbie later worked as a dancer and choreographer in a theatre on Jersey Island, a holiday resort in the English Channel, birthplace of her fathers cousin, actress Lillie Langtry.

In 1965 she married Alan Dorday in Sussex with her father officiating. Alan worked for *Air New Zealand* as a flight dispatcher at London Airport and in 1967 he was transferred to Auckland. Settling in Manurewa they soon had three children but it didn't take long before Debbie auditioned for a local pantomime then put together some shows for her local *Plunket* group. She invited two pretty blonde sisters to join her to form *The Fantails*, a cancan dance troupe which found gigs at Phil Warren's *Shoreline Nightclub* on the top of *Shore City* and the *Turquoise Room* in Otahuhu. In 1973 Debbie approached Bob Sell and persuaded him to find her a position in his *Annabelle's Cabaret* in Fort St, New Zealand's first theatre restaurant.



Debbie was offered a lot of work on television; dancing, a celebrity quiz show called *Blankety Blank*, comedy and advertisements. When *Annabelle's* folded in 1983 she did a year at *Ace of Clubs* with comedians Johnny Bond and Doug Aston then worked 3 months at the *Sorrento* with *Brian Harris' Follies*.



'That was a very difficult time. Fort Street had become very sleazy with strip clubs and massage parlours moving in. The *Ace of Clubs* was due to be demolished to make way for the *Aotea Centre*. I had it in my mind that what was needed was a place where the dancers were treated well with clean dressing rooms, not made to wear skimpy costumes or put up with sleazy comedy.' In 1984 she took that concept to Parnell, found some backers and established her own venue. They borrowed \$500,000, leased the *Danish Reception Lounge* on Parnell Road (formally the *Liberte Theatre*) and renamed it *Burgundy's Theatre Restaurant*, presenting Debbie's comedy act, a two hour long Variety show with a crew of 10 dancers and singers, smorgasbord dinner and drinks. 'I was thinking of a colour and the venue had a burgundy coloured carpet so *Burgundy's* it was.'

Initially Debbie's mum looked after the children or they helped out in the kitchen but eventually daughter Jodie performed on stage, Jason helped behind the bar and Joshua ran the disco. Alan and Debbie drifted apart but they remained good friends. 'We discovered that one of our bar staff was stealing us blind; by 1988 we were close to insolvent but Michael Stickland came to the rescue. We re-evaluated all of our procedures, took firm control over our operations, reduced debt and began a regular series of TV and radio commercials. Mike did research and discovered that the oldies loved our shows. With that in mind we added matinees and arranged tour buses to transport senior citizens and farmers from as far away as Whangarei, Hamilton, Thames and Tauranga. We'd even bring in Asian tourist parties.' In 1989 Debbie married Michael on the stage at *Burgundy's* and he became the stage and promotions manager, running front of house, lights and sound. He also held down a day job as an engineer.



In its heyday *Burgundy's* was putting on eight performances a week and creating a new show every year. 'We performed at night and rehearsed during the day. I auditioned dancers when they were 17 or 18 and contracted the best for two years but they often stayed a lot longer. They came from all over New Zealand, straight from dancing school; our company was the only other full-time employer of professional dancers apart from the *New Zealand Ballet*.'



By 1996 Debbie was exhausted and decided not to renew the lease. 'I didn't want to dance anymore and wanted to see more of New Zealand. I'd been at *Burgundy's* for 12 years. We had a crew of dancers and 42 staff plus massive overheads; the rent alone was \$1000 a week.' In 1998 she and Michael began touring with 2003 Benny winner Jim Joll. They travel with two mobile homes and a trailer about five times a year for several weeks on end, performing at retirement villages, theatres and clubs.

Debbie has also acted in a number of New Zealand films including, *Nutcase* (1980) and *Sylvia* (1985). She has been honoured a number of times by the *Variety Artists Club of NZ*; 1984 *Scroll of Honour*, the *Benny* in 1991, *Life Membership* in 1996 and the 2010 *Top Variety Act Award*.

Debbie's daughter **Jodie** (b. 4 January 1968) danced at *Burgundy's* for 5 years and went on to work on a number of important New Zealand dramas including *Zena*, *Shortland Street*, *Market Forces* and *Burying Brian*. She holds the 1999 *Best Supporting Actress Award* for *Via Satellite* and starred as *Mrs Wilkinson* in the *Auckland Theatre Company's* production of *Billy Elliot*. Lately she is working on a television series called *Westside*, a prequel to *Outrageous Fortune*, with a character who is Cheryl West's mother; the matriarch of the matriarch. Sounds scary!