

**DI'S OUTSPOKEN SHRINK • JOHN HARGREAVES, 1945-1996**

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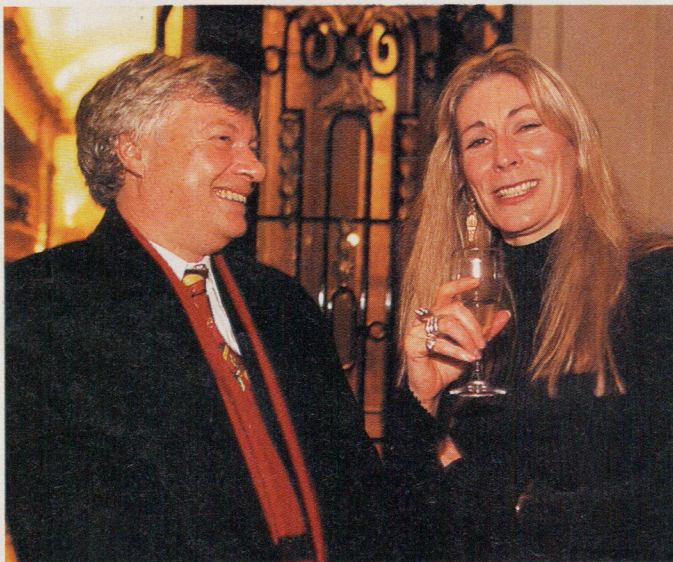
# ART ATTACK

Cultural officer Rebecca Hossack makes Australian art hot in London and puts Sir Les Patterson out of a job

**R**EBECA HOSSACK WELCOMES VISITORS to cultural events at Australia House on London's The Strand effusively, as if they were guests at her own private party. And in a sense they are. At the gala launch she staged in November of New Images, an Australian-British Government venture to foster cultural links between the countries, the Australian expatriate moved assuredly, in a long black dress, through the grand old crystal-chandeliered, marble-floored ballroom where waiters proffered duck crepes and emu, crocodile and kangaroo canapés. Networking, greeting, boosting

House A-grade guest list is a big change, Robertson says, from the bad old days of the '70s when he first arrived in London as a Rhodes Scholar. "It's now much more relevant, no longer [a mausoleum] of corrupt oil executives and elderly buffoons whose greatest moment in life was meeting Sir Robert Menzies." Today, as a rendezvous for young artists, "you're getting people who don't kowtow to the British, who don't feel culturally inferior." And Barry Humphries, slipping into the character of his fictional creation, the disgraced and disgraceful Aussie "ambassador for the yartz" Sir Les Patterson, likened Australia House in his "successor" Hossack's reign to "the bloody Uffizi Gallery".

In turning the fusty old pile into a kind of antipodean Versailles, Hossack, 40, is expunging the yobbo image propagated by grog-stained, lecherous Sir Les and moved Fleet St to call her "The Sheila Who Gave Sir Les the Elbow" and exult, "Yes, Bruce Does Give a XXXX for Art". Hossack realises many Britons form their image of Australian culture from our soap operas, but "there is an increasing interest, a real curiosity and excitement



▲ Robertson says Hossack "has transformed" Australia House.

her country, the cultural officer of the Australian High Commission was on the job.

Here, British PM John Major sipped icy Seaview champagne and marvelled, schoolboy-like, at a green, purple and red laser show. There, Australian celebrity QC Geoffrey Robertson of *Hypothetical* fame rejoiced at Hossack's success hyping the best of our art, ballet, opera, literature and film to Britons who once knew us mostly by our beer and sports stars.

And thanks to Hossack, the Australia

about it . . . they see us as slightly exotic."

In a short time, Hossack has blitzed London with literary evenings with Clive James and Tom Keneally, opera nights, and *The Stuff of Dreams*, an exhibition of hanging tapestries from the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. In March she will stage *Tutu Gorgeous*, an exhibition of costumes and posters from the Australian Ballet. She promoted the London preview of *Muriel's Wedding* and the launch of Australian entrepreneur Peter Holmes à

In spite of the demands of her job, Hossack (in her gallery surrounded by *Fish*, a work by British artist Ann Stokes) says that she is not naturally gregarious and would rather be "sitting in Uluru" than be a social butterfly.







Court's London successes *Tap Dogs*, *Ningali* and *Lano and Woodley*. A self-confessed bureaucratic "head-ache", Hossack's drive has frazzled Australia House staff. Says deputy high commissioner David Goss: "We organised too many things [but] the advantage of that is that it put us on the map."

Hossack, too, is "exhausted" but "I really want to [be cultural officer] and I care about it and I love it. I work at it from the minute I wake up to the minute I go to bed, spreading the word . . . I don't like all those questions about it [being a job] be-

scouring Geelong's antique shops for old Australian ceramics.

In 1981, after graduating in law at the University of Melbourne, she travelled to London to study at the bar but soon switched to a diploma in art history at auction house Christie's. Then it was to Venice to take up a scholarship at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum. There, she discovered Marcel Duchamp's *Valise*, a box designed by the celebrated artist and filled with miniatures of all his works, which Guggenheim had been using as a step to climb into her bath. Polishing her favourite sculpture, Brancusi's *Bird in*

1990 she enticed Aboriginal artist Clifford Possum to London "to meet the Queen". A chance remark to the Earl of Harewood, cousin of the Queen, and she and Possum were invited to a royal garden party at Buckingham Palace. "We hired Clifford a top hat and tails and he put paint-brushes through his hat band," Hossack recalls. "During the party we were taken to meet privately with the Queen. It was brilliant. Clifford said that it was his No. 1 day."

Hossack applied when in 1994 the new Australian high commissioner Neal Blewett sought to appoint an officer to promote Australian culture in the UK. Nevertheless, she says, "I don't think I should be an arbiter of taste. I see myself as a facilitator, putting people together, acting as a conduit. And I don't like being seen as an initiator; I'm not the artist."

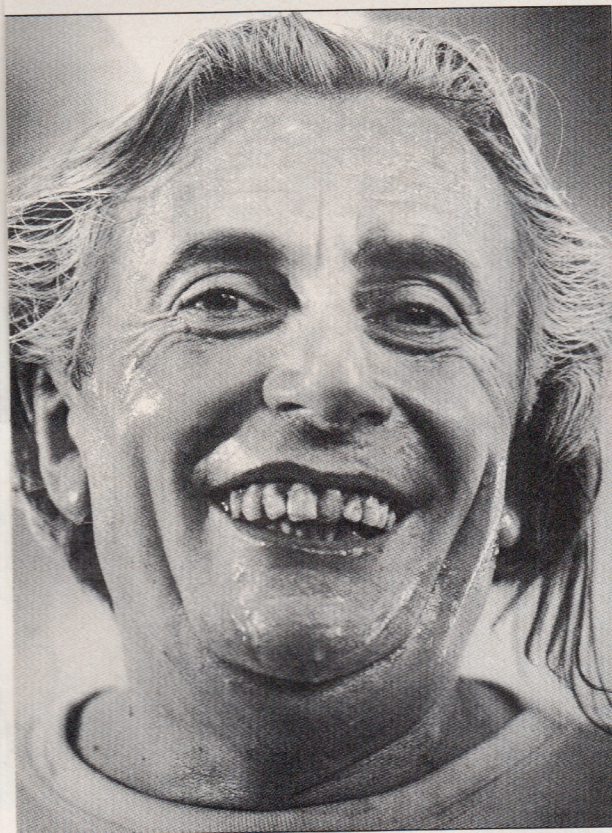
Hossack's flat, above her Fitzrovia gallery, belies such modesty. It is a riot of colour and innovation. A jigsaw of paintings, motifs and hangings—many of them Aboriginal—bedeck walls painted papaw, reds, green, pink, yellow and blue. Persian and Tibetan rugs are scattered on the floor. Shelves brim with art and poetry books and there are eclectic displays of beloved objects, such as tobacco pouches of African bushmen, a bunch of emu feathers, Ethiopian lip-stretching plates, a necklace of dog teeth and an Aboriginal death stick—"If I point it at you, you'll die." "All the things I love just come and live here together," she says.

This includes her author husband, Matthew Sturgis, 35. A crumpled beanpole, he specialises in English decadence of the 1890s. The two met in Oxford in 1983 and married in the Lakes District. Her wedding ring was engraved with Aboriginal symbols.

Hossack, Blewett and Goss have prepared a program of high culture into the next century, but Australian fashion and rock and roll may also figure on the agenda. A daunting challenge, but her battle to change Brit perceptions will not be fought alone. Now out of a job, Sir Les Patterson is at her beck and call. "I'm just in the background," he slobbers reassuringly. "I occasionally get a ca when she's got a really curly one."

■ LARRY WRITER

■ VIRGINIA GINNANE in London



▲ Hossack's husband, Matthew, wrote a satirical diary of the royal corgis, who note that after an Australian PM's visit an antique clock goes missing.

◀ On Hossack's appointment, Sir Les sent her a note: "All the best, Becky, with love from your unworthy predecessor."

cause it's like saying, 'Do you breathe?' It's a lifestyle. It's 24 hours."

Hossack is the eldest of three daughters of Donald, a retired surgeon in his late 60s who was also chairman of the Victorian Ministry of the Arts, and Joan, also in her late 60s, and a "fine needlewoman", says Hossack. She grew up among artists such as Clifton Pugh, one of whose paintings hung above her cot, and Leonard French, who created a stained glass window for their home. From an early age, says Hossack, "I was passionate about Australia." She recalls embroidering gumnuts on her clothes and

*Space*, each day took her breath away.

Back in London she became freelance agent to a network of artists. Then in 1987, she was cycling down Windmill Street in Fitzrovia in the West End when she saw a building for lease and soon set up the Rebecca Hossack Gallery, exhibiting art and media from a range of cultures, including Aboriginal, Pakistani and Indian work. An early show was *Song-lines*, a 1988 exhibition of Aboriginal art. In 1991 she opened a second gallery in a basement off Piccadilly.

Hossack has never been content simply to hang her artists' work. In