

## Claudia Boulton



*'Living is the first thing. Seize the day.'*

*While we were at Quanbun Downs there was another visitor staying and it was she who had greeted us on our arrival. A warm-faced woman with windswept white blonde hair emerged from the kitchen, her hands covered in dough and held up in mock surrender. 'Hi! I'm Claudia. Come on in and have some tea and cornbread.'*

*Fondly nicknamed 'the Duchess' by her mates at Quanbun, Claudia Boulton is an English actress who has performed all over the world in everything from feminist reviews to plays by Samuel Beckett.*

*Talking to her was for me one of the trip's magic moments, as our paths only crossed by a couple of days.*



MELISSA

I was conceived in Egypt, born in Rome, and raised in England. My godparents, the people who brought me up, were quite old by the time I turned up, and very Edwardian. I had a very proper upbringing. My godfather was a clergyman and we were always poor. My real father was an alcoholic journalist. I used to go and spend my summers with him, which were quite mad, because he was a true Bohemian.

It was very exciting being with my father. When I was about five we went

on a yacht and got shipwrecked. I had to go to shore in a lifeboat. The shipwreck was off the coast of Denmark, because I remember seeing the statue of a little mermaid out in the harbour and going around the Danish royal palace and being terribly impressed. I heard that if soldiers spoke to you that they'd be shot, because when they're on duty they have to be very formal. I was terribly thrilled when this guard on duty said 'Hello, little girl', because I thought 'Gosh! What a brave man to speak to me.' I had a highly coloured imagination.

I always lived with the Boultons, and fitted in at the bottom of five children. Gerry, my father, never wanted me adopted. He had met the Boultons in India in the war. He had actually left me in a children's home when I was about eighteen months old, and sent a message to them saying, 'Do you know of any English families who would like to look after Claudia? I don't want her adopted, but I can't stand looking after her myself.'

I had always heard these stories about my mother when I was little, this dreadful woman. I had an address for her in Italy and I met her once when I was about seven. I don't remember it very well. When I was twenty-one

I went and found her. The worst feeling I've ever had was when I arrived in Italy at the airport and she wasn't there to meet me. I couldn't believe it. I called England and said, 'What am I going to do? Mama wasn't there to meet me.'

I had the address in Milan, so I went there. I climbed all these stairs to the top of the building, paint peeling off the wall and all those sorts of things. I got to the top and rang the doorbell in trepidation, and a woman appeared at the door in floods of tears. I think I just burst into tears immediately too. She said, 'God, Claud! I'd been waiting for you for ages at the airport,' and I said, 'What do you mean? I've been waiting for you.' There are two airports in Milan.

She also said, 'Well, Claudia, I gave you a name that would travel well and quite frankly, any daughter of mine who couldn't make her way in life I wouldn't be interested in meeting anyway.' I realised on meeting her that I was terribly angry with her for abandoning me. It was terribly deep. I mean, she left when I was only three months old. I thought she left because she didn't love me.

Mama had been a model, and she told me she'd left my father because he tried to kill her in Rome just after I was born.

She'd found a gun in his bedside drawer, and it was loaded, so she'd taken the bullets out of it. Just a few days later, on the full moon, they were having a huge argument, and he said, 'I'm going to kill you.' He rushed out of the room and came back with the gun, and she didn't know whether he thought it was still loaded, or whether he'd reloaded it, or whether it wasn't loaded at all. He pulled the trigger. The look in his eyes said he meant to kill her. Her hair went white overnight.

So she split, and he disappeared with me. She couldn't find me, and by the time she found me I was about four and a half years old. I was obviously having this terribly proper upbringing, so she thought it best to leave me there.

At university I got a degree in philosophy and English. I became a teacher and I taught English and drama, then I moved into a squat in North London, and I said, 'I'm never going to get another job unless it's in theatre.' So I didn't, until I got a job in theatre. It took about six months. I worked with a couple of groups and I remember, about three days before the big opening night of this performance, the director said to me, 'Look, Claudia, I want you to stay to do the show, but I don't think you're going to work out in this

company.' So I was asked to leave.

That was more or less the reason I ran off to India, my dreams of fringe theatre having crashed to the dirt. I argued too much. I needed to look at what had happened in my life. I definitely escaped from England to go to India—I only had a one-way ticket. I spent a year there having various experiences and they locked me up in a lunatic asylum. I do now actually have an official certificate of sanity from the Indian Government, which is more than most people get in their lives.

When I came back from India, I thought I should become a gardener, or a masseuse. Luckily an old friend from university rang me up and said, 'Look Claudia, I've got this theatre company, and we open in a week's time. One of the girls in the show doesn't want to do it, she doesn't want to be a performer, so would you like to come and audition and see if you'd like to be in the play?' It was a group called Beryl and the Perils. It was fast, furious, feminist fun theatre. The show was called *Is Dennis Really the Menace?* and it was all about sex.

For some reason it was an enormous hit. It got better and better and we ended up working together for three years, getting Arts Council grants and

touring around Europe. The second show was called *Beryl's Perils Do Nuts*, and that was about our experiences of insanity one way or another. Collectively we seemed to cover a pretty fair range of experiences.

I'd always felt society was pretty intolerant towards insanity. I do know that, if I tried to do what I actually succeeded in doing in India in the West, I would have probably been locked up a lot earlier, probably at the noisy, dirty stage, and I'd never have got through it. Whereas, by the time they locked me up in India, I was over it and just hungry. They basically saved my life. I think that was the point we were trying to make in our show; having a crack-up can be a very positive thing, and shouldn't make you feel you're a failure because it gives you a chance to find out who you are.

A lot of people don't have the chance, they have nowhere to go, nowhere they can really make a loud noise and scream. Where do you go in a city if you want to scream and shout? I felt very lucky with Beryl's, to be given the opportunity to stand up on stage, scream, shout, and have people pay to see it, and clap. It was very releasing.

After three years I'd had enough of it. I think feminism or that sort of

discovery of yourself as a woman is a stage you have to go through. I was never a separatist. One of the girls in the group was a rad lesbian feminist, but the rest of us were heavily heterosexual, heavy being the operative word. When the Perils split up, I went to Kathmandu in Nepal, to see a friend of mine who is a painter. Her name is Corina McNiece. I was only going there for two weeks, and I ended up staying six months because it was so interesting. I didn't really have anything to do back in London, so I did theatre there.

The Hotel Vajarah in Kathmandu is managed by a German lady called Sabina Lehman, who trained with the Berlin Ensemble. She runs a theatre company there which uses Tibetan and Nepalese actors. She said, 'Oh marvelous, Claudia, you can stay and be in a play.' So we wrote this absolutely brilliant play and Corina painted a fabulous backdrop for it. The play was called *Moody Movie*, and it was an exploration of different movie genres. It was a big hit. We even performed at the civic hall in Kathmandu, and people were selling tickets on the black market.

Corina was having a show at the October Gallery in London (part of the

Institute of Eco-Technics), so when I went back to London I visited her a few times. She invited me to go to a conference in France, also run by the Institute. It was a conference on space. I met a real live *Apollo 9* walking talking astronaut, which I thought was quite something. I also met this bunch of people there who were talking about space, and blow me down if they weren't going to go and live there. They also had a theatre company called the Theatre of All Possibilities. It turned out that after this conference in France some of them were going on a theatre tour of Nigeria. They invited me to come along, so I went.

I eventually became tired of just doing theatre. I'm not over-fond of the theatrical community as such, 'Darling, darling'. Actors who just act lose touch with the real world in some ways, so I've always been interested in other things. It ended up, after I'd been in Nigeria, I came back to London and went to work at the October Gallery.

Then I was invited to come on this trip to visit Australia, through friends that I'd met in the Institute. They said, 'We do plays in the Outback in summer, so why don't you come?' I couldn't resist such an invitation. I'd done a Beckett play last year called *Endgame*.

There are four characters, two of which spend the entire play sitting in dustbins, and they put their heads out for about five minutes each. I was one of these dustbin characters, and I got so fed up with sitting in this damned dustbin that when I came out of the dustbin at the end of the last performance I said, 'I'm going to do Beckett's *Happy Days*. In that play Winnie [the main character] is buried up to her waist in a mound of earth and she talks to centre stage for an entire hour and twenty minutes.

I started to learn the lines at the beginning of this year and it took me three months. I thought, if I'm going as far as Australia, I'd like to take my own thing with me, so I decided to travel round the world with *Happy Days*. I performed it in Kathmandu whilst staying with Sabina. I'd sent her a fax saying, 'Can I come and do this here?' I got a message back saying, 'Well, the curfew's still on and the season is over but we'll beat the drum for you, Claudia.' They had a great crowd, and the curfew was lifted when I got there.

I went to Bali, and I did four performances there. I did it in Broome, and I'm hoping to do it in Darwin, Sydney and then America. It's very exciting, because I've never actually

managed to get right around the world before. Now I'm forty and will actually do it. It's more difficult in the imagination than the actuality.

I like acting and travelling. It's much better than being a tourist because you have to interact with the local community. An audience come and they see the show, and you make a connection with the places you go to in a way that you don't if you just get off the bus. This play is a two-person play, so I have to pick up my male half wherever I go. He's called Willie. They say you can pick up a Willie anywhere, if you're lucky.

I never feel I'm wasting time when I'm doing theatre. I can spend hours making props out of cardboard or helping backstage, and I feel that it's time well spent. I've never made very much money doing theatre, but I've certainly made a lot of friends. To me this Beckett play is a bit like a PhD in theatre. I can now really say, 'Well, I'm an actress.'

If you hear you've got cancer or if you think you've got AIDS, you wonder, 'What will I do with my life? I'd better give up my job at the abattoir or the bank and go and live a little.' Living is the first thing. Seize the day.