

A chance to shine

Celebrating 50 years of Showgirls

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The year is 1962. The month is April. The Women Strike for Peace Movement is picketing the White House hoping President John F Kennedy will hear their appeal and cancel proposed atmospheric nuclear tests. The Russians have launched another unmanned sputnik. Australia's Prime Minister Robert Menzies is in London for a heads of government meeting. At home, the Minister for Immigration, Alick Downer, is facing criticism over recent decisions concerning Vietnamese refugees; a baby whale has been sighted in Sydney Harbour; and consumers are waiting with baited breath for the next big thing – the release of the new EJ Holden.

The day is Saturday, April 14. Showtime. Rain is forecast but for now the clouds have parted, as they have done on and off throughout the morning, to allow a burst of sunshine. It helps, as 18 year-old Margaret Mackay dashes through the crowds at the Sydney Royal Easter Show, not to be encumbered with an umbrella. She's horribly late having just jumped off her horse after competing in the ring to win a second place. Her mother and the hairdresser will be getting anxious. She needs to quickly freshen up, change into a more appropriate outfit, and get her skates on again if she's to make it to the next venue. Margaret is one of the finalists of the first ever Miss Showgirl Competition. And

as she dodges the Easter throng, she knows it'll be death to her chances if she keeps the judges waiting, especially when one of them is a famous Hollywood movie star.

The movie star? That's Jane Russell. She's in town for a four week singing engagement at Chequers nightclub. At 40 years of age she is still stunningly beautiful, standing out like a beacon from the regular Show crowd. She's gracious and a total publicity pro. When she shakes hands later that afternoon with Margaret Mackay – the winner – it's the United States of America in all its glory shaking hands with the district of Dungog.

Remembering the day thirty years later, Margaret said she was awestruck. She won £250 and a silver tray, and afterwards led the Grand Parade. She also kissed a lot of sweaty faces in the Woodchop Arena.

Ms Russell, it was later revealed, had advised her co-judges to choose the girl they would like their son to marry. Margaret was flattered, but the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) never intended the Showgirl Competition to be about manufacturing wives, or beauty queens. It was to be about creating ambassadors for the Show movement and for rural NSW, and was part of a wider strategic push to strengthen ties between the metropolitan and regional societies.

Conducted with the official assistance of the Agricultural Societies Council of NSW, which continues to represent nearly two hundred societies today, the Competition was immediately popular. The format was simple and is essentially unchanged: each local show society holds a competition, with the winner going on to compete at a zone level. From there state finalists are chosen to compete at the Sydney Royal Easter Show.

Below: 1962 Showgirl contestants at Dubbo Airport
Right: Margaret Mackay, winner of the first Showgirl Competition, with judge Jane Russell, in 1962



By broadening the horizons of young women and providing them with the skills and connections to participate more fully in public life, the Showgirl Competition has made a significant contribution to the advancement of women, at a grassroots level and beyond.



Left: 1975 Showgirl winner, Louise Nash, feeding an Angora goat
Below: Showgirls enjoy a dinner at Parliament House in 1979

Though Ms Russell may not have paid specific attention to it at the time, the judging criteria is also essentially the same today. Over the course of a series of interviews, talks and functions, contestants are judged on personality, confidence and goals, general knowledge, rural knowledge, presentation and speech.

Clare McDonald, the 2010 Showgirl winner, is more positive than ever about the value of the Competition after also serving as a judge. She's seen contenders blossom, even between the local and zone stages, to become well informed individuals and engaging communicators.

Local and state winners attend as many country shows and official functions as they can and this effectively plugs them into community and regional networks with ongoing mutual benefits to all concerned. Clare says those diverse experiences taught her how to be diplomatic in different environments: she learnt to always be relevant, tailoring her speeches and behaviour to each situation. This 'strategic awareness' is something she's taken with her into her new career in rural banking.

Today's state finalists, like Clare McDonald,

tend to be highly educated, highly ambitious women; some have multiple degrees. But Clare is keen to ensure younger and less experienced girls continue to enter the competition. She encourages them to plan on entering twice, urging them to regard their first attempt as a steppingstone instead of a failure.

By their own admission, the entrants in the first decades of the competition were an unsophisticated lot. The Women's Liberation Movement was just taking off, and opportunities for women were still limited. Contestants in those days tended to be at the younger end of the eligible age range (many women were already married with children by their early twenties), and some lived in places so remote it took two days of travelling for them to reach the zone competition. For those who made it to Sydney for the final, the chance to stay in a top hotel and be escorted around the city was truly exciting.

"The idea was to give the girls a fantastic experience in Sydney," says the Hon Lloyd Waddy, the RAS Councillor who coordinated the competition for 30 years from 1979 to 2009. "Where else are they going to get to meet with the heads of Rural Press, mixing with them; chief executives of banks, that sort of thing?"

AND THE WINNERS WERE....

- 1962 Margaret Mackay (Dungog)
- 1963 Jan Hewson (Goulburn)
- 1964 Suzanne Higgins (Gloucester)
- 1965 Roslyn Sylvester (Singleton)
- 1966 Kathleen Westcott (Alectown)
- 1967 Camilla Galway (Quirindi)
- 1968 Priscilla Renshaw (Binnaway)
- 1969 Christine Flannery (Cowra)
- 1970 Judy Hufton (Harden)
- 1971 Janet Hillyer (Junee)
- 1972 Jane Munro (Moree)
- 1973 Margo Bassett (Dubbo)
- 1974 Sue Godwin (Coonamble)
- 1975 Louise Nash (Baradine)
- 1976 Margo Albert (Wollongong)
- 1977 Mary Anne Tonkin (Gosford)
- 1978 Phillipa Hutton (Mungindi)
- 1979 Meg Harris (Murrumbateman)
- 1980 Judy Marheine (Lochinvar)
- 1981 Robyn Johnson (Cooma)
- 1982 Kym Collins (Patterson)
- 1983 Lee Sherringham (Peak Hill)
- 1984 Joanna Wakefield (Goulburn)
- 1985 Christine Cameron (Wee Waa)
- 1986 Melanie Trethrowen (Dubbo)
- 1987 Jane Houston (Glen Innes)
- 1988 Emma Addison (Gresford)
- 1989 Yvonne Berry (Dorrigo)
- 1990 Nell Farmer (Quirindi)
- 1991 Dimity Parr (Griffith)
- 1992 Helen Davidson (Tamworth)
- 1993 Sarah Wilson (Mudgee)
- 1994 Penelope Smith (Castle Hill)
- 1995 Anna Swift (Narromine)
- 1996 Lee Cobb (Condobolin)
- 1997 Penelope Tomlinson (Moree)
- 1998 Narda Gilmore (Oberon)
- 1999 Fiona Woodburn (Forbes)
- 2000 Kirsty Roberts (Bathurst)
- 2001 Kate Woodward (Dorrigo)
- 2002 Claudia Wythes (Canowindra)
- 2003 Cathie Beveridge (Cootamundra)
- 2004 Skye Dixon (Cooma)
- 2005 Ashley Wright-Hands (Berry)
- 2006 Jillian Kilby (Coonamble)
- 2007 Melanie Nichols (Nimmitabel)
- 2008 Anna Unger (Peak Hill)
- 2009 Kimbalee Morris (Coonabarabran)
- 2010 Clare McDonald (Condobolin)
- 2011 Hilary Scott (Camden)

In another way, the world literally opened up for Showgirl winners when an overseas trip for two became the major prize in the second year of the Competition. The first recipient, nineteen year old Jan Hewson (Carter) from Goulburn, was utterly shocked by the surprise announcement. She hurriedly rearranged her life and took off to Fiji, Hawaii, the USA, Bangkok, London and Europe. Lunch with the Australian ambassador at the League of Nations was a highlight. Subsequent Showgirl winners visited agricultural shows and horse fairs in the UK and Europe as part of their trips, acting as ambassadors for the RAS.

Many of today's Showgirls are already well travelled before they enter the Competition, so much so that the major prize is now provided as cash, allowing winners to use it according to their own priorities. But for Jan Hewson and the rest of 'the original basics' (a term coined by another early Showgirl), the trip was a dream come true.

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connections to participate more fully in public life, the Showgirl Competition has made a significant contribution to the advancement of women – at a grassroots level and beyond. Many have gone on to serve the Show movement and become community and rural industry leaders. The RAS itself has benefitted: Robyn Clubb, winning in 1981 as Robyn Johnson, became the first woman on the RAS Council, followed by Margaret Pennefather who won as that slip of a girl in 1962, when her maiden name was Margaret Mackay. Councillor Kate Wickson was also a Showgirl, reaching the finals in 1994, and recently elected Councillor Claudia Wythes was a Showgirl winner in 2002.

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When the 50th anniversary celebration takes place this year at the Sydney Royal Easter Show, it will be a time for past Showgirls to connect once again and reminisce about old times. It will

also be a celebration of the Hon Lloyd Waddy's long stint at the helm of the Competition. He says it's been an exhilarating experience watching so many young women grow, and he finds the calibre of the entrants astonishing. "They have wonderful CVs... They are so diverse and extraordinarily skilled," he says. "There is no doubt in my mind that the western world has blossomed, absolutely blossomed, in an extraordinary way since we put a real premium on women's education."

At the 30 year Showgirl reunion in 1992 Margaret Pennefather joked that she didn't much care for the title of oldest Showgirl in Australia. She passed away in 2006 so no longer holds the mantle, but this year, especially, we will think of her, a slim honey-blonde scooting through the Showground, about to become the first of many. Hurry up Margaret, get a wriggle on... Don't you know Jane Russell is waiting?

For information on the 50th anniversary celebration event please see page X or email showgirls@rasnsw.com.au. Images courtesy of The Land and the RAS Heritage Centre.

