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Twilight of the Goddess

"I want to have a good laugh at times"

By MICHAEL SOUTHERN

THERE is every reason in the world why Florence Austral should be a bitter woman. Once hailed the world over as the greatest Wagnerian soprano of her time, and one of the greatest of all time; toasted wherever she went, and invariably followed around by a host of ardent admirers, she is now confined to her modest suburban cottage at Merewether, a suburb of Newcastle, NSW, remembered only by her few friends in this city, and her many friends in Melbourne.

Multiple sclerosis, a disease that dogged Mme Austral throughout her career, and eventually caused her retirement as an operatic soprano and later as a concert artist, is gradually taking command of her body. She has not been outside her cottage in three years, and depends on neighbors, newspapers and radio to keep in touch with the outside world.

Mme Austral has been pictured to the world by journalists in recent years as a poor, sick, lonely—and even bitter—old woman. "I'm not bitter," she told me. "I know I could be, but I'm not. I can't be bitter, it just isn't in me. I think I take after my father.

"Sickness is something that usually commands the body and the spirit — even the sense of humor. I'm disabled—I know that—but I'm not sick. I still find things to laugh at and enjoy. I can still move around my house, cook, keep in touch with new artists through reading about them in the paper, or hearing them on radio. I'm not really lonely either. All my friends are in Melbourne and they often write to me, and there are several people here in Newcastle who call on me quite often."

Florence Austral's father was born on the borders of Norway and Sweden, and, when 16 years old, ran away from his home, eventually taking a ship to Australia. While on this passage, he changed his name to Wilson, so any persons looking for him would have a more difficult task. "His name was Lindholm — Wilhelm Lindholm — in a way it's a pity he changed it because it would have made a good professional name for me. Anyway, he met my mother in Sydney, and they moved to Melbourne where I was

born. He died while I was a child, and later mother married a man named Fawwaz. I didn't really like him."

As a singer, Florence Fawwaz first came to general public notice in 1913 at the then famous Ballarat South Street Competitions. In 1919 Florence Fawwaz (her stepfather had changed the spelling) decided to go overseas—first to America, then London.

Hoping to make an entry into grand opera in New York, she arrived to find the season booked. The director of the Metropolitan was impressed with her voice, but unable to offer her a role. She took lessons in Italian opera, but, generally disappointed with her prospects, planned to travel to England and then return to Australia.

It was in New York she first saw Caruso—at the Met: "I saw his face and neck turning a vivid red as he was singing," she said. "He was forcing his voice to make some of the top notes. I said then to the girl I was with that he'd burst a blood vessel one day — and he did."

Florence Fawwaz went to London, and there received some minor engagements and tours, eventually climaxed by a recital in the Albert Hall. But her desire was opera, and in 1922 she was auditioned at Covent Garden — an opera house which throughout its history has proved to be the place of discovery of Australian talent. She was engaged to sing as Brunnhilde.

This was the time when Fawwaz disappeared, and Madame Florence Austral was born — at the inspiration of Covent Garden's director, Major Higgins.

Mme Austral made her debut on May 16, and was hailed immediately. From then on she was in demand throughout England, the Continent and the United States. Among her favourite tours were those to America, where she sang at the great Cincinnati Festivals as well as in major cities.

In 1934 she embarked on her great Australian tour, with the first concerts in Perth, and then in major centres on her way through to the east coast. The end of 1934 saw the start of a tour by the Royal Grand Opera Company, with Austral, Muriel Brunskill, Browning Mummery and Horace Stevens among the leading artists. After some triumphant Italian opera, Australia then saw the real greatness of Austral with a production of "The Valkyrie".

For Austral, these were memorable days of glory — days she still likes to talk about, when the prophet received honor in her own country. She had come for six months, and a year later was still singing here. In the middle of the enthusiasm for opera which the company had stirred, Sir Ben Fuller announced that in March, 1935, he would call a meeting to put forward a scheme to give Sydney one of the finest opera houses in the world.

Now that Sydney is at last getting round to building "the finest opera house in the world", Austral will not be forgotten. Some of her tapestry work will be featured there in a special display room.

One incident in her life that Austral likes to talk about is her meeting — such as it was — with Melba. It was in London, and both were appearing on the same programme. Melba sang "La Boheme" in the first half, Austral "Aida" in the second. It was the following morning on stage when, as Austral was talking to the stage manager, Melba approached.

"I wanted to leave then," Mme Austral said. "But the stage manager asked me to stay with him. Melba came towards us, and then he introduced me. 'You know Madame Austral?' he said to Melba. 'Austral?' said Melba, 'who's Austral?' 'You sang with her last night,' the stage manager said. 'Oh', said Melba, 'she was black then'—and off she went."

Mme Austral is still interested in operatic singers, and particularly in Joan Sutherland. "I first remember her when I presented the Melba Cup to her at a competition in Sydney that I judged. I remember her voice. It was tiny—but it had something about it that distinguished it from the other competitors. I have not seen her since.

"Generally, the sopranos seen today do not seem to have the same power in their voice that we had in my day. Of course, we were big women, and the modern soprano seems to be smaller. Bustatious is about the best word to describe our lot—they used to pull us in at the waist and push the chest out," she said.

After the war she returned to Australia, and settled in Melbourne. In 1952 she moved to Newcastle to teach at the Conservatorium there. Her sclerosis forced her to retire in 1959.