

The Chronicles of Eldershaw

From STEPHEN EDGAR'S prize-winning
verse novel, *ELDERSHAW*

Adapted for the stage by GREGORY AITKEN

Directed by KATE HORSLEY



DRILL HALL THEATRE COMPANY

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JINGI WALLA



HELEN STEWARD is a creative and intelligent diarist who yearns to escape from the restraints of marriage and family. Beautiful, vulnerable and at times reckless, Helen will choose the romantic life.

Set predominately in bohemian Hobart in the 1940s and 1950s *The Chronicles of Eldershaw* charts the journey of this free-spirited woman shrugging off traditional values. Attractive to both sexes, Helen is viewed by her men as tempestuous.

It's not that Helen was engaged in a worthy cause – she just wanted oxygen from stifling social constraints. Her struggle for self-expression will resonate with women today who are still fighting for their fair share and for their rights.

Our premiere Drill Hall Theatre production brings the audience into Helen's memory-scape; one of strange beauty. As spectators, we witness her epiphanies in the Tasmanian forest and at a wind-blown Greek archeological site. Titled by Luke, her former lover, as *The Chronicles of Eldershaw*, Helen's deeply personal stories are recorded in her journals.

The Chronicles of Eldershaw is our offering to the ones that we love, have loved and to the community that we serve. Enjoy this beautiful work by the poet, Stephen Edgar, adapted for the stage by Gregory Aitken and directed by Kate Horsley.

Sunita Bailey

President Drill Hall Theatre Company

In 1969 Luke was part of a group watching a rehearsal of the Greek tragedy, Oedipus Rex. The viewing was arranged by his soon-to-be lover, then English teacher, Helen. In 2024, Luke, who is approaching oblivion, reflects upon his time with Helen. Previously he had never wished to know or be forced to think about Helen's life prior to their relationship. "Those tumultuous and troubling days". In 2024, Luke can no longer avert his consciousness. Helen's journals, The Chronicles of Eldershaw, the inside story of Helen's earlier life, are in his hands. Luke is compelled to read them.

Cast

Helen

Younger Helen

Martin

Vi, Maddalena

Luke

Wil Gaudry

Possum, Running Man, Grandpa, Skipper, Vera,

Old Greek Woman, Old Greek Man

Possum, Lex, Chris Cross QC, Greek Bus Driver,

Biscuit Vendor

Sasha

Linda Rutledge

Avia Sebasio-Ong

Russell Eldridge

Cate Feldmann

Gregory Aitken

Yasir Assam

Leonie Mills

Steve Richards

Hielrick Fidele d'Amour

Musicians

Hielrick Fidele d'Amour, Avia Sebasio-Ong

Physical Theatre Performers

Leonie Mills, Steve Richards



The Purposeful Omission of Context



Stephen Edgar was the recipient of the PM's Award for Poetry in 2021

Stephen Edgar's acceptance speech for the Colin Roderick Award 2014 for *Eldershaw*

ELDERSHAW consists of three interlinked narrative poems and, as the blurb says, it draws on personal experience, reimagined and transformed through the lens of fiction. They do not exactly constitute a verse novel. You could, I suppose, think of the book as a novel in which only the crucial episodes are related, while all the connecting and subsidiary matter is omitted: a series of highlights that jumps from place to place and time to time over the years, leaving the reader to join up the dots. An acquaintance of mine, the American poet Joshua Mehigan, characterised this as “the purposeful omission of context”, a description for which I am enormously grateful to him; now if anyone complains that I have left out vital details, I can reply: “Oh, no, no, no. That is purposeful omission of context.”

My reason for writing the poems was simple enough: to make some record of the lives of three people, in particular, whom I loved, my first partner, Ann (called Helen in the poems), and my parents, and in doing so to unburden my mind of a freight of accumulated emotions, explored in other ways elsewhere in my work from time to time; and, in the case of Ann and my father, both of whom are now dead, to give some final shape to my feelings. Just as the apparent hauntings in the poems are really a figure for the psychological and emotional conflicts of the characters, so they are perhaps a counterpart for the way these people have haunted my memory. So the poems may be an act of exorcism as well as an expression of love.

They are also quite a good read, I think. In fact, my original motivation for writing the title poem, *Eldershaw*, was to preserve some of the marvellous anecdotes that Ann had told me over the years of events in her earlier life, before I knew her— anecdotes by turns moving, and funny, and horrifying. The whole book grew out of that. The non-chronological arrangement of the sections in the title poem is perhaps partly to reflect the haphazard operation of retrospect and partly the emotional disorder being represented. Originally each of the poems was

conceived as a separate work, but in due course I saw how they could form a loosely connected narrative, even though the connection of the second poem, *The Fifth Element*, to the other two lies in the solitary mention of Helen's name. The seed of *The Fifth Element* lay in my mother once mentioning to me the episode which opens that poem, when my father, after returning from the war, observed that, in contrast to the green of England, the Australian landscape seemed to him dead. And it struck me that he was projecting onto the external scene his own psychological wound, a wound extending through his subsequent life, and leaving its mark on us. In his poem *See Naples and Die* Anthony Hecht uses an epigraph from Simone Weil which is apposite here: "It is better to say, 'I'm suffering,' than to say, 'This landscape is ugly.'" The third poem, *The Pool*, is a logical extension of the title

*It was the emotional truth I was after,
not factual accuracy ...*

poem and deals with my own relationship with Ann/Helen, its beginnings at any rate, and her death, though curiously enough, the image of that haunted seaside pool itself was grafted on to the poem from an originally separate idea and was linked with a separate narrative strand which I ultimately dispensed with.

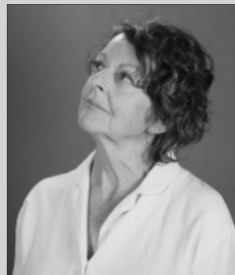
Why did I cast the poems as fiction? Well, in the first place because, despite their basis in fact, I have invented certain details, altered chronology and events, conflated characters; also in part to give myself some emotional distance from the events, a bit of artistic elbow room. Partly too because, especially in the first poem, *Eldershaw*, if I had identified real people by their actual names I would have been morally obliged to do a deal of research to make sure I had got the facts right, and I had no wish to write that sort of poem. It was the emotional truth I was after, not factual accuracy. Having used fictitious names for the first poem, I had to make the other two match. For the record, the house *Eldershaw* is in reality called Ashfield, and is in Sandy Bay in Hobart. And the painter Wil Gaudry is the writer Hal Porter, who himself wrote about Ashfield once, giving it the poetic but unlikely name of *Cindermead*.



Avia Sebasio-Ong is
Helen Younger



Recovered from an old ottoman after her death, Helen's journals chronicle her adolescence, marriage and life after. *The Chronicles of Eldershaw* draws on personal experience, reimagined and transformed through the lens of fiction.



Linda Rutledge is
Helen Older

The genesis of the *Eldershaw* project



Gregory Aitken

IN 1969, Stephen Edgar and I were in our final year at Sydney Technical High School. Stephen was already showing signs of becoming a poet while I wanted to be an actor. In 1971 Stephen was living in London with his partner Ann Jennings. I was at drama school in North Sydney.

We caught up at the 2006 Adelaide Writers Festival and later at the Byron Writers Festival. Stephen was now an internationally respected poet. Writing of *The Strangest Place*, John Banville claimed Stephen Edgar should be recognised as one of the very best poets of our days. Clive James wrote of Stephen, that, “If he were a jazz musician,

he would be the kind who, when playing after hours, leads all the others to pack up their instruments and listen.”

Stephen Edgar’s *Eldershaw*, a narrative verse novel, was shortlisted for the Prime Minister’s Poetry Prize in 2013. After reading *Eldershaw*, I suspected it had dramatic potential. Rather ambitiously I asked Stephen whether I could have a crack at adapting *Eldershaw* into a performance piece. The poet encouraged me.

In December 2021 the Drill Hall presented a moved reading of *The Eldershaw Chronicles*, as it was then known. The following day Stephen informed me that he was the recipient of the PM’s Poetry Prize.

In January this year, a connection was made with the daughters of Ann Jennings on whom the character of Helen is based. Ann’s daughter Karen Darby has given the Drill Hall team permission to use over 20 photographs of Ann, family and other characters related to the story. Karen guided me to some biographies and autobiographies about bohemian Hobart in the 1940s and 1950s.

On 28 and 29 February 2024, after many script permutations we presented a moved reading on the renovated stage at the Drill Hall and sought audience feedback. Stephen attended. I asked Kate Horsley to direct the *The Chronicles of Eldershaw*. Kate is a Shakespearean with an excellent understanding of blank verse.

The production of *The Chronicles of Eldershaw* is almost ready. Stephen will again be in attendance at the season’s first weekend along with Karen Darby. Fifty-five years on from those momentous days in 1969.

The Chronicles of Eldershaw project gratefully acknowledges \$8,000 in funding from the Commonwealth’s Regional Arts Fund, Jane Lister’s \$5,000 for underwriting the production, box office receipts from Mark Swivel’s production of *Mum* and *The Too Young To Be Angels* festival for the purchase of a Tasmanian Oak Beale piano and for contributing to production costs.

Gregory Aitken, actor, producer.

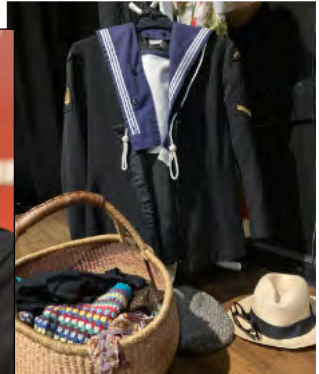
It's an honour to tell this story



Kate Horsley

DIRECTING *The Chronicles of Eldershaw* feels like I am holding something incredibly precious, and that's because I am. Stephen Edgar's verse is precious. It is sublime. To be given permission to try and create a piece of theatre from his verse is such a gift, and gratitude is an understatement. Stephen has been so gracious every step of the way and worked collaboratively with changes the verse needed to have in order to produce a working script which can live theatrically. Stephen as poet and Greg as adaptor of the verse have delivered us a gift which I hope that myself and the cast will do justice to. What a story. What an honour to tell it.

Kate Horsley, Director



CREATIVES



Stephen Edgar, Writer

Stephen's first published poetry appeared in 1979 in the Tasmanian literary quarterly *Island*. His distinguished achievements include being co-winner of the 2014 Colin Roderick Award, for *Eldershaw*, and the 2021 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Poetry for *The Strangest Place: New and selected poems*.



Gregory Aitken, Adaptation/Luke

Greg's favourite roles at the Drill Hall include Professor Serebryakov in *Uncle Vanya*; Reverend Hollis Schultz in *Honk If You Are Jesus*; the journalist Mark Colvin in *Mark Colvin's Kidney*; the artist, Leo Bailey in *Mr Bailey's Minder*. However, the current role of Luke in *The Chronicles of Eldershaw* is the role that deeply touches him.



Kate Horsley, Director

Many moons and another lifetime ago Kate trained at The University of London (Goldsmiths College) achieving a Bachelor of Arts in Drama and English Literature, and a Master of Arts in Theatre Arts. A lover of all things Bard, Kate has acted in and directed many productions of Shakespeare both in the UK and Australia. Of late it's been a privilege to have Stephen Edgar's incredible verse infiltrate her life.



Sunita Bailey, Lighting Design

Sunita has always been intrigued by the subtle yet powerful effect of lighting to transport the spirit from naturalism to magic realism. Her favourite lighting designs at the Drill Hall have included *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Ballad of Edgar & Mary*, *The Incorruptible* and *When The Rain Stops Falling*. She loves the direction that *The Chronicles of Eldershaw* is heading. Earlier this year she co-curated the season of *Too Young To Be Angels*, which honoured our local artists.



Linda Rutledge, Helen

Linda is loving being back at the Drill Hall and playing Helen's other half in *The Chronicles of Eldershaw*. Immersing herself in Stephen Edgar's extraordinarily beautiful text and working collaboratively with such a creative bunch is heaven for Linda. She trained at The Drama Studio in Sydney, but has lived and played in the Northern Rivers for over thirty years.



Avia Sebasio-Ong, Younger Helen

Avia is a versatile actor known for her captivating performances on stage. With a background in classical and musical theatre, she brings depth and nuance to every role she plays. Unafraid to explore both the dark and light of a character, her dedication to the craft and dynamic presence have earned her recognition amongst her peers.



Russell Eldridge, Martin

Russell Eldridge is an experienced theatre performer over several years with various companies across the region. He was also part of the Top Blokes trio that performed at the Melbourne Comedy Festival. His shows at the Drill Hall include *Uncle Vanya* and *The Dumb Waiter*.



Cate Feldmann, Vi, Maddalena

Cate is delighted to be involved with *The Chronicles of Eldershaw*. She has been acting, when possible, since her first role in a melodrama in country Victoria in 1977. In the *Chronicles* she is delighted to finally share the stage with Linda Rutledge, a long held ambition, and also, once again, with Avia Sebasio-Ong. Being part of bringing Greg Aitken's adaptation, hard work and dedication to an audience is an honour.



Yasir Assam, Wil Gaudry

Yasir has been in 14 productions in the Northern Rivers (mostly Murbah), starting in 2014, with recent roles including *Macbeth* (Macbeth), *Così* (Lewis), and *The Man from Earth* (John Oldman). He last acted at the Drill Hall in *The Incorruptible* in 2017. Really excited to be back at The Drill Hall once again!



Leonie Mills, Possum, Grandpa, Skipper, Vera, Old Greek Woman, Old Greek Man

Leonie Mills OAM (Old And Mad award recipient).
Known for her short comic-relief roles.
Founder of Spaghetti Circus. Makes a good cookie.



Steve Richards, Possum, Lex, Chris Cross QC, Greek Bus Driver, Biscuit Vendor

Steve, affectionately known as Ric, is a trained Secondary School teacher. He has been involved in Gymnastics and Circus for over 50 years at a State and National level as a competitor, coach, and judge. Steve has worked in several physical performance groups including "Legs On the Wall" and "The Flip Flops" as a performer and/or technical advisor. Steve is currently working as a teacher of Health, Physical Education and Outdoor Education, as well as a trainer at the local Spaghetti Circus.



Hielrick Fidele d'Amour, Sasha

Hielrick Fidele d'Amour, trained under the great mime artist, Marcel Marceau, in Paris. Many of Hielrick's creative skills will be on display in *The Chronicles of Eldershaw*. He is the show's mime co-ordinator, video photographer and image maker behind the old and new photographs projected onto the screen. Also, Hielrick is composing and then playing the incidental percussion music onstage. Being a dancer he is ideal for the role of the European ballet dancer, Sasha Malensky.



CREATIVES

Author Stephen Edgar

Adaptor and Producer Gregory Aitken

Director Kate Horsley

Lighting Sunita Bailey

Lighting Consultant John Rayment

Visuals and Audio Alex Benham

Stage Manager Cathy McDouall

Costumier Leisa Mcilwain

Incidental Music Hielrick Fidele d'Amour, Avia Sebasio-Ong

Video & Photography Hielrick Fidele d'Amour, Cathy McDouall

Jennings family images courtesy of Karen Darby

Show Video Recording Andy Bambach

Program and FOH Manager Warren Kennedy



IN MEMORY OF KATH THOMAS



Kath Thomas

The production of *The Chronicles of Eldershaw* is dedicated to our great friend Kath Thomas of Cardiff, Wales. Kath was the powerhouse behind the co-production of Patricia Corneliu's *Do Not Go Gentle* in October 2017.

Somehow she managed to get two theatre companies from Cardiff and Mullumbimby, 10,600 miles apart, to blend into one. Due to Kath's guidance we produced a wonderful Australian play about the art of dying gracefully and with dignity. Kath exited the stage on 21 August 2024.

Friends forever.

Special thanks to the poet Stephen Edgar, who entrusted our little Mullumbimby theatre company with his wonderful verse novel *Eldershaw*, permitting us to transfer his book to the stage.

DRILL HALL THEATRE COMPANY SUPPORTERS

Jane Lister	Baker & Daughters
Mark Swivel	Mullum Mac
Karen Darby	Mullum Printworks
Spaghetti Circus	North Coast Events
Wandana Brewery	



The Drill Hall Theatre Company acknowledges the Bundjalung people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we work, and their unique relationship with the land, seas and waterways.

We pay our respects to their elders past and present, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples,

