

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person

Entry ID: AWE23090832

Musa, Helen Margaret OAM

(1948 -)

Born 6 July, 1948, Pambula New South Wales Australia

Occupation Arts advocate, Critic, Drama teacher, Dramaturg, Editor, Journalist

Summary

Helen Musa enrolled in theatre studies at the University of New South Wales in the early 1960s and spent the subsequent twenty years teaching drama at secondary and tertiary level, including in Malaysia, while involving herself in theatrical productions of all sorts. In 1990 she became the editor of *Muse*, a monthly arts magazine, later becoming the Arts Editor for *The Canberra Times* and the founder and convenor of the Canberra Critics Circle. In 2015, she received a Medal in the Order of Australia for her service to the performing and visual arts as a critic and magazine editor and, in 2020, she was inscribed on the ACT Women's Honour Roll for her advocacy for the visual and performing arts in Canberra and Australia.

Helen Musa was inscribed on the ACT Women's Honour Roll in 2020.

Details

“Helen Musa was born to Lillian May (Maysie) Dunn (1915–2008), a double certificated nurse and radiographer, and Gordon Alexander Duff (1907–1964), a civil engineer. The Duff family moved to Forbes in New South Wales early in Helen’s life. The younger of two sisters (her elder sister was Diana Robyn Duff, 1942–1968), Helen was educated at Forbes Public School and then Forbes High School. She concluded her schooling (in 1960 and 1961) at Methodist Ladies’ College (MLC), at Burwood in Sydney, as a boarder having been awarded the J A Somerville Memorial Scholarship. A home replete with books, questions and ideas, a creative mother who directed and made props for the local musical and dramatic society, and attendance at concerts and plays touring Forbes, introduced and fuelled Helen’s interest in acting and theatre. She sang, wrote plays, and was involved in theatrical productions at school and these passions shaped her university studies.

Armed with a Commonwealth scholarship, she chose to study (1962–65) at the University of New South Wales as it had, in 1959, established the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) and, from 1961, had begun offering courses in theatre studies. She gained a Bachelor of Arts with 1st Class Honours enjoying subjects in both humanities and sciences. The stimulation and ferment of university life led to her involvement in debating, theatre, student politics, the choir at Christ Church St Laurence at Railway Square and writing for *Tharunka* (the University’s student magazine). Early signs of Helen Musa’s trademark independence, outspokenness and restless energy appeared consistently in school reports which noted her propensity to talk back and be forthright. She recalls that MLC prescribed Serepax for her, but this was short lived as she had an allergic reaction to it. In December 1966, having begun postgraduate studies earlier that year, she visited England (with a detour to Israel) on a Churchill Fellowship researching English provincial theatre records and how drama was taught there. Returning to Australia she embarked on doctoral studies (later abandoned) during which she tutored part time.

Her marriage, in May 1965, to Alfred van der Poorten (1942–2010) ended in divorce in 1970 and she became drama teacher at Kambala School in Vaucluse, Sydney. Over the subsequent twenty years she taught at secondary and tertiary levels including at Mitchell College of Advanced Education in Bathurst (1971–72), the University of Newcastle (1973 and 1975–76), and Frensham School for girls in Mittagong (1982–86), all in New South Wales; and at Canberra College of Advanced Education (1974) and Canberra Boys Grammar School (1987), both in the Australian Capital Territory. A significant appointment, intellectually and personally, was as Lecturer in Performing Arts at the Science University of Malaysia, in Penang, teaching acting, directing, stage management, lighting, sound, and the history of western and Asian theatre. Taking up this role in August 1977 enabled her to experience and learn about Asian musical, dance, theatrical and religious forms and traditions and direct plays informed by them. While in Malaysia she directed eight plays including *Hamlet in Malay*. This introduced her to actor and poet Musa Bin Masran (born 1959) who starred in the production. Despite the play’s success its tour was curtailed following criticism that it was ‘deeply immoral’. In 1980, while in Malaysia, she married Musa Bin Masran, a devout Ahmadi Muslim, and converted to Islam. They have one son, Omar Musa (born 1984), a poet, novelist, rapper and woodcut artist.

Helen Musa’s first job in theatre, in 1973, was as production and stage manager for the University of New South Wales Opera Company, established by Roger Covell. In 1975 she was Chief Dramaturg and head of play selection for the Australian National Playwrights Conference. As a teacher she balanced the academic with the practical, managing theatrical and other productions with students. In parallel, she worked on community theatrical productions (for example, with Hunter Valley Theatre Company), presented radio programs (for example, on the FM station in Bathurst and on 2CY in Canberra) and wrote reviews for a variety of papers and journals, including *The Canberra Times*. In the early 1980s she received a special writers grant from the Australia Council to write the history of NIDA and, in 1983, her edition of the stage adaptation of Steele Rudd’s *On Our Selection* was published.

In 1990 she established, and has since convened, the Canberra Critics Circle a forum and resource for Canberra reviewers (of all major art forms) working in print and electronic media. The beginning of 1990 marked the start of another significant phase in her career with her appointment as editor of *Muse*, a monthly arts magazine published in Canberra. Six years later, she joined *The Canberra Times* as Arts Editor leaving that role a decade later in mid-2007. Following this she wrote for the *Capital Magazine*, a free bimonthly magazine, and *Canberra CityNews*, a free weekly magazine. In 2009 she became Arts Editor of the latter. From 2008-2010 she worked for the Asia-Pacific Journalism Centre.

Her inaugural overseas trip as part of her Churchill Fellowship began a lifelong interest in travel and in the world’s cultures, particularly Islam. With the abatement of work commitments, travel, research on behalf of friends and the Australian Dictionary of Biography, studying languages and securing the future of the Canberra Critics Circle continue to be sources of intellectual stimulation. Guided by the dicta that one should question everything, that one should ‘say it straight’ and cultivate an inner life, she considers herself the eternal optimist. Asked to describe how others might describe her she nominates ‘big mouth’, ‘talks too much’ and that her enjoyment of the cut and thrust of debate could seem like ‘showing off’. In 2015, Helen Musa received a Medal in the Order of Australia for her service to the performing and visual arts as a critic and magazine editor and, in 2020, she was inscribed on the ACT Women’s Honour Roll for her advocacy for the visual and performing arts in Canberra and Australia.”

Archival resources

[Oral history recorded with Helen Musa](#)

Author Details

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Created 12 June 2023

Last modified