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SIMONE BENNETT-SMITH *Hollywood Bound*

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HOLLYWOOD *Bound*

*Simone's ladradoodles,
Ziggy and Pepper!*

In a few months, Gold Coast gal Simone Bennett-Smith will head to LA to try her luck on the world's biggest stage. We caught up with Simone to talk about her extraordinary journey so far, her hopes for the future, and why she can never look Prince Charles in the eye again.

Words *Suni Golightly* | Photography *Aleece Young*



Dancing on an international stage with performers such as Cher, Robbie Williams, The Scorpions, East 17 and Mariah Carey, Simone's career took off.

WHEN SIMONE BENNETT-SMITH HEADS FOR LA LATER THIS year, it will be with two feet firmly on the ground. Although she seems too young to be a veteran of anything, a veteran she is, with decades of performing internationally under her belt. From a young age Simone was drawn to the world of entertainment and has carved out a solid career for herself in one of the toughest industries there is.

The easy demeanour and vibrant, friendly nature has seen her become one of the Gold Coast's most beloved adopted daughters. They are characteristics Simone says come from her picture-perfect childhood. Growing up in Hastings on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, Simone recalls her childhood memories filled with open spaces, magical times and plenty of room to dance around. Her family home was originally an apple orchard that Simone's parents turned into the first strawberry farm and exporting business in the Southern Hemisphere, shipping their goods to exotic places across the world such as Dubai and Saudi Arabia.

"It is still one of my favourite places," Simone says of her childhood home. "The grounds were full of established trees that were probably hundreds of years old and the old stables were full of antiques and discarded saddlery. It had an amazing feel and was breathtakingly beautiful. It was the perfect place for

age that each person in the process is just as important as the next proved to be a lesson Simone has never forgotten.

"Growing up around such famous personalities in some ways has made me fearless to the hurdles that may cross my path I could see not only the big world beyond the wholesome fields of my childhood, but the grit, determination and dedication it took to be successful, and I wanted a piece of it."

Landing her first real "big break" as Judy Turner in Kevin Jacobsen's production of *A Chorus Line*, Simone danced, acted and sung her way around Australia on a 14-month contract before moving to London to build on the foundations of her already established career. Here in this new, exciting city, full of endless opportunity, and money to fund productions and events, was where Simone says her "true spirit" kicked in. "London was when I grew up. Baptism by fire! For the first time in my life the safety net of family and familiarity was pulled out from under me, I loved it, embracing the challenge, although at times I was terrified."

Terrified or not, Simone's career took off, dancing on an international stage with performers such as Cher, Robbie Williams, The Scorpions, East 17 and Mariah Carey. "I would be doing MTV awards one week, a video clip for Blue the next, before flying to Germany to launch their new Adidas range, then to be back in



children. I would spend hours on end as a captive princess under one of the old majestic conifer trees." It was here, among the stables and conifer trees, that Simone discovered her passion for entertainment. With plenty of time and space for all types of imaginary scenarios and adventures, Simone conjured up the dream to entertain and perform, and it wasn't long until the family had relocated to Melbourne to allow her to study ballet full time. "As a teenager, I became more aware of the energy and possibilities that a big city could offer," she says, "and I am sure my mum did as well, waiting outside dreary dance halls and becoming my personal chauffeur for lessons, auditions and performances. It should really be said that behind every successful person is an exceptional mum!"

It was in Melbourne that Simone's parents also made the glamorous transition into the entertainment industry, owning a recording studio. Watching performers such as INXS, Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder gave Simone her first real insight of the industry. "There's nothing like the stale smell of a recording studio after an all-night session or an impromptu jam at my parents' house on the weekend, that I secretly would sneak out of my room to listen to," she laughs. Watching the rise and fall of volatile performers – either through drugs, their egos, or unprofessionalism – made Simone conscious of being true to her word and professionalism. Learning at an impressionable

time to perform for the Queen at the Prince's Trust Gala at Albert Hall. What a city!"

But it wasn't all glamour and glitz, and Simone had her fair share of embarrassing moments. "I remember lining up backstage with the all the other artists after my performance at The Prince's Trust Gala to meet the Queen and Prince Charles. I had only been in London for a couple of months so the scenario seemed surreal and ridiculous to me. Everyone was trembling with excitement. There was a Royal aid, if you like, giving us all a crash course in 'Greeting a Royal' etiquette and I started giggling because I was so nervous. Well you know what it's like when you start giggling when you are not meant to, you can't stop, and then I was kind of laughing and crying at the same time. Anyhow, I got it together and managed a curtsy and a hello to Prince Charles; he looked me dead in the eye and said 'Marvellous performance'. This was all very exciting and afterwards we all ran back to the dressing rooms where I came face to face with my reflection in the mirror: in my state of hysteria, my watering eyes had managed to soften the vast amounts of eyeliner and mascara on my eyes and instead of looking elegantly dishevelled I looked like Alice Cooper!" she laughs, cringing at the memory. "Can you imagine what Prince Charles was thinking? I was so embarrassed. I'm sure he wouldn't have given it a second thought, but I was devastated."



*“Work diligently and honestly...
always get the full story
before you go in with all guns
blazing, and never believe
someone when they say ‘I can
make you famous’”*



Backstage at the British Music Awards and in Crooked Business with Ahn Da.



Embarrassing brushes with royalty aside, over the five whirlwind years in London Simone started to expand on her talent, training at the Actors Centre in Convent Garden and performing in many fringe theatre productions. She also started getting requests for presenting roles for various events and television. Soon dancing took a back seat to acting and presenting. "I had always been passionate about ballet, but never really fitted the mould," she says. "I understood the confinements and discipline that comes with ballet shoes and tutus, but still had the influences of my childhood and the music that echoed out of it. Getting in trouble for over-dancing, making everyone laugh when the teacher had turned her back, and my slightly rock and edgy persona are all proof that London made me realise my true calling. I was born to entertain."

Taking a break from her hectic schedule, travelling the world twice over, Simone took a holiday on the Gold Coast where she met her future husband, Adam. Their daughter Charlie followed one year later. Simone describes her wedding as one of the happiest moments of her life, marrying in the summer of 2003 with daughter Charlie as their flower girl.

A special wedding gift from a long-time friend set the romantic mood for the day, and gave the wedding an international celebrity buzz. "One of my closest girlfriends from London had flown here for the wedding and her fiancé, Michael Graeme from Boyzone, decided as his gift he would sing a special ballad for our bridal waltz, it was amazing."

With a settled family life Simone jumped back into work, landing roles in Australia's thriving film industry including *Under the Radar* and *Crooked Business*, both being shot on the Gold Coast.

In addition, Simone has been the anchor on Channel 7's *Old Best Living* series for the past three years.

Executive producer of the series, Paul LeMura, says that he rates Simone as being in the top ten per cent of presenters in Australia.

"Simone is super professional on set and is very comfortable in front of the camera," he says. "There are a lot of stereotypes when it comes to television presenters these days, but Simone is just a natural and the camera loves her."

More recently Simone was chosen from a nationwide search as the spokesperson and face for a Suncorp campaign. Simone is also the ambassador for the charity A.C.T. for Kids.

And now Simone is on the move again, heading to LA later in the year, hoping to break into the toughest market of them all. "You know the old saying 'How do you make God laugh? Tell him your plans'," she says. "But I am looking for opportunity in LA. Even though there is a global economic crunch at the moment, there are still so many pilots and new productions up for grabs over there."

"Working in the entertainment industry – whether as an actress, dancer or on stage – has been my dream since I was a little girl. It's what I do, it's who I am. I can't imagine life without it."

So what is she hoping for in *La La Land*? "I hope for synchronicity," she says. "I'm a big believer in 'the flow': if you're trying to achieve something or desire a particular thing and the universe keeps blocking your way, then it's just not meant to be at this time. Whereas there are times when you have a wish and by chance meet a complete stranger that aids your path and then a song or something comes on and feels like a clue that you are going in the right direction."

"In my dream scenario, I would love to work with The Farrelly Brothers, in one of their comedy films. I have read that a lot of their directing is based on improvisation within the boundaries of the script. Being given a sense of artistic freedom as an actor is when the 'magic' happens in a scene. I would love to be in a comedy or a production that required a sense of 'heightened reality'."

"I would also like to think that I will have more opportunities to work in Australian television and film production, with the ideal situation being based permanently in Australia."

While LA may be the land of opportunity, it's also the land of eating disorders, body dysmorphia and the type of image scrutiny that has been the downfall of many an actress. While she is aware of the importance her industry places on superficial qualities, Simone has a fail-safe plan to stay sane among the craziness. "Before I met my husband, I really don't know how I stayed sane," she says. "Perhaps youth was on my side! But these days, all I have to do is nestle my nose into my daughter's hair while she sleeps, take a big breath in, or 'hug it out' with my dogs; that keep my head straight! "I've never given appearance much thought in the past," she says. "I have always looked after my skin and been very active. I have noticed a few changes sneak in, but that's only normal. I still stand by the belief that I may have 'looked' better 10 years ago, but I didn't have a bloody clue, whereas now, I have grown into my skin and feel that my age gives me an edge that I didn't have in my 20s. As long as Sharon Stone, Demi Moore and Susan Sarandon (all actresses I greatly admire) still work and look great, then it's onwards and upwards in my eyes!"

"It is an exciting industry, but it does come with a lot of competition and negativity. You can't 'eat, sleep and breathe' it or you will quite honestly implode!"

"Having a daughter, restarting my career and tragically losing my father last year have all combined to my experience that I liken to as a 'coming of age'. Being in my 30s is empowering. I feel that my life can now be a victim of me, instead of me feeling a victim of my life."