

All Inner Rowe

In his time he's been a pop star, a soldier, a cabaret artist, an actor, a single parent, a veterans' activist, and a stage performer. But today Normie Rowe is a casualty of technology, his computer having locked down its precious contents, while a looming deadline draws nearer.

'I've been putting together a slide show for a special birthday present,' says Normie, 'and it was going beautifully until yesterday, when the computer froze under the volume of the pictures'. I couldn't fix it myself, so I've had to take it in. The party's tomorrow.'

But Normie's not fazed by this setback, nor by any other, it seems; he takes it all on the chin. 'I just cop it sweet, and move on,' he says, 'and make sure I don't walk into the same punch twice.'

Well-founded words from a man who's weathered so much – the Vietnam experience, a chequered career, and personal sorrows – and still 'just gets on with things'. Was he always so philosophical? 'Oh yeah,' Normie reflects, 'philosophy has always been an important part of my life. And rules. I believe that rules are generally made to make life easier, not harder.'

'For instance, when I became a full-time singer, I decided I'd never sleep for longer than eight hours at a time. That went against the notion that entertainers slept all day and partied all night, but I found it worked for me; I'd give my body what it needed, then get to work. And that ethos is drilled into me; even now, I'd love to be able to lie on the beach all day, but I can't. I like to keep myself busy.'

And how. Along with a series of shows with his old mate Johnny Young, there are three albums on the drawing board for this year, as well as a trip to the Missouri Blues Festival, and plans to tour a Neil Simon play.

'My intellect prefers [doing] theatre,' Normie muses, 'mainly because I'm a "head" person, although my outward persona is non-intellectual. The most exhilarating period of my life was spent at Sydney's Ensemble Studio, learning about drama and theatre from Hayes Gordon, who'd also taught a stream of great Australian actors like Jack Thompson, Lorraine Bayly and Max Cullen. I was thirty-seven when I went there, and had always done singing or cabaret, but I put that aside to become a clean canvas on which Hayes taught me to paint the next stage of my career. He was a master mentor.'

Following the Ensemble training, Normie took a stage role as a faded rock star, and was then offered a part in *Sons and Daughters*, where working with television icons like Belinda Giblin and Abigail enhanced and consolidated his formal learning. Then, of course, came the meaty theatrical roles in productions like *Les Miserables*, for which he's probably known best of all.

But none of this came easily. The phenomenally successful pop star of the late 1960s and early '70s who'd had demi-gods like Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones guest on early singles like *Ooh La La* was forced to take a sharp change of direction after his well-documented National Service. Returning from Vietnam with his pop star days behind him and a family to support, Normie launched himself into a solid career in cabaret, working the New South Wales club circuit. 'In those days,' he explains, 'there were roughly 1800 clubs in New South Wales – around 1100 in Sydney alone – and I spent over three-quarters of the year doing club shows. While I missed making records, working the clubs allowed me to buy a house and put the kids through school, and to develop my cabaret skills.'

'These days I can work in almost any environment. It's an absolute dream to work in places like [the Gold Coast's] Twin Towns Services Club; all the facilities are there - full production, great publicity, and there's always a good crowd. But I've worked in the worst places, too and it's those shows that set me up for the rest of my life.'

‘Once I did a show in a club whose audience comprised older European businessmen and night shifters who went there after work, and I didn’t even get on stage until after midnight. There was nothing in that environment to make it easy - there was a language and culture barrier, an age barrier, a [musical] taste barrier and a gender barrier. But at the end of my two-hour show I got a huge standing ovation, and it was then that I thought: “I am an entertainer”. That was the moment.’

‘As long as you can put a good show together, you’ll go well; and in my experience, if you’re respectful towards your audience, they’ll read that, and return that respect. There’s no such thing as a bad audience, only entertainers who haven’t found the key to unlock that audience. And the more experience you get, the more keys you have on that keyring.’

So there are aces in even the leanest of hands? ‘Oh yeah,’ says Normie. ‘When you look back on a life of rich experiences, and you’ve survived and there are good things to do with the next day, even the toughest times can be the best times, because of the experience they lend.’

‘But today is undeniably the very best time of all. Always today.’