

# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## One-woman show with great expectations

Charles Dickens beckons – but first there's time for fried onions, writes **Joyce Morgan**.

**M**iriam Margolyes wants a word with Julia Gillard – although a word is not all the forthright British actor might deliver if she encounters the Prime Minister.

"I love Julia Gillard, she's great fun, but I believe she is not in favour of gay marriage," Margolyes says. "She should be smacked."

Margolyes – a "socialist, lesbian Jew" – is on a roll and her crisp English diction reaches a crescendo.

"People just get their knickers in a twist about this. Everybody should just grow up. If somebody you don't know wants to get married, what the hell does it have to do with you? It doesn't hurt you, it doesn't impinge on you," she says.

Margolyes, who has been with her Australian partner for more than 40 years, has no plans to tie the knot.

"I don't want to ape a straight relationship," she says. "The only reason I'd get married is to get some presents. I want some Le Creuset sets. Not that I cook."

Perhaps she doesn't cook meals as most of us know them. But as we sit in the otherwise bland surroundings of her hotel apartment with its galley kitchen, the smell of fried onions is overpowering. "I'm very fond of onions," she says.

I am, too, although not as a mid-morning snack. Still, whatever gives you stamina. And stamina is what Margolyes will need as she embarks on a world tour of her one-woman show *Dickens' Women*. It coincides with the 200th anniversary of Dickens's birth and starts in Australia.

The gregarious and ebullient Margolyes, 70, delivers her spiky comments with the grin of a born mischief maker. She delights in candid off-the-cuff comments as she did on a recent television talkshow.

"I had no idea what I was going to say," she says. Nonetheless, egged on by host Graham Norton, she suddenly expanded on the merits of breaking wind.

"I fart a lot," she announced on national television. "I think it brings people together."

She proceeded to deliver a monologue on the subject. In less skilled hands – and without her impeccable comic timing – such an episode could have done to Margolyes's career what the Oprah Winfrey sofa moment did to Tom Cruise's.

Instead it prompted a role in *My Mother's Curse* with Barbra Streisand, with whom she worked on *Yentl* more than 30 years ago.

"She's the same age as I am, although she doesn't look it. She's had considerably more massages than I have. I don't think she's had any facelifts. I inspected her minutely," she says.



Miriam Margolyes ... "[Charles Dickens] was very good at drawing women, he just didn't respect women who he didn't fancy. And it's a very common male trait." Photo: Tamara Dean

Margolyes's 50-year career embraces film, television and voice work. She appeared in the *Harry Potter* films as Professor Sprout, was the voice of Fly the dog in *Babe* and recently appeared as Madame Morrible in the musical *Wicked* in London and on Broadway. She first appeared in *Dickens' Women* in 1989 and has continued to perform the two-hour show. It's a long run on any count, especially given her attitude to one-person shows.

"I've never liked one-person shows, and this was never meant to be a one-person show," she says.

It was written as a two-hander but when the male actor pulled out before an early tour, Margolyes faced a dilemma.

"I thought how the hell can I do two people?" she says. "Well, I can."

Indeed she plays rather more than two people. She performs 23 characters – male and female – who appear in the work and life of Dickens. She also recently published, with Sonia Fraser, the book *Dickens' Women* to accompany the show.

Although she regards Dickens as the English language's greatest prose writer, Margolyes has reser-



Weaving magic ... as Professor Sprout, middle, in *Harry Potter*.

vations about his attitude to women. There's no doubt Dickens was harsh in his depiction of older, unmarried women.

"He certainly desired women ... but I think he felt betrayed by women and he took it out on women in the way he drew them. He very seldom gives them the benefit

of the doubt, unless they are these young, little flibberty-gibberty people. That was what called up his sympathy. But a fully rounded woman he didn't really draw ... He was very good at drawing women, he just didn't respect women who he didn't fancy. And it's a very common male trait.

**'I want to connect with people. It's a real need.'** **Miriam Margolyes**

"What he fastened on was their grotesqueries, and particularly he reserved scorn for women who tried to be sexually attractive but weren't."

Yet his women, and especially his older women, are among his most memorable. And not just towering figures such as the cruel Miss Havisham (*Great Expectations*). Even the minor characters are vivid pen portraits, from the vain Mrs Skewton (*Dombey and Sons*), the predatory lesbian Miss Wade (*Little Dorrit*) to Mrs Todgers (*Martin Chuzzlewit*) with "affection beaming in one eye, and calculation shining out of the other".

Margolyes is a frequent visitor to Australia, and she and her partner have a house in the NSW southern highlands. They met in the 1960s through the family of Manning Clark, the late Australian historian.

"Manning [Clark] is the magnet

who brought me to Australia. He had a sabbatical in Oxford and he brought his family," she says.

"His daughter went to my school, and because of that my whole Australian life began."

Margolyes, an only child, remains friends with the family and has retained friendships from all stages of her life.

"I have a gift for friendship because I need it. I had no brothers and sisters so friends become terribly important. What I love is connection with people. That's been right through my life. That's why I'm always talking to strangers. I want to connect with people. It's a real need."

As we are about to part, Margolyes "connects" with an earlier thread of our conversation. She grins under her mop of grey curls and suddenly performs what she only alluded to on the Graham Norton show. Perhaps it was the onions.

Miriam Margolyes performs *Dickens' Women* at Glen Street Theatre from Friday until February 12. She will speak at the State Library of NSW on Monday at 5.30pm.