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BIG BREAK
TEENAGER DANCES HIS
WAY TO PARIS OLYMPICS

LISA MAYOH

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Allie Pepper is attempting to climb the world's 14 highest mountains in just two years. It's a feat only two people in the world - both men - have accomplished. It took them 16 years. Meet the Blue Mountains woman making history



Story KERRY PARNELL

Leaps and bounds

Dancer Petal Ashmole Winstanley knows about grief through raw experience. She also knows about exceptional love. At 77, she's written a book on her intimate knowledge of both

All any of us can aspire to is a life well-lived, and Petal Ashmole Winstanley has literally danced through hers. As an international ballet dancer, she has jetted to career highs and picked herself up after heartbreaking falls.

The Perth-born dancer has met with soaring triumph and tragedies so crushing they would have finished the best of us. But not Petal, 77, who – employing her mantra of “get up, dress up, show up” – danced with the Royal Ballet in London alongside Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev, found love and suffered cruel losses with grace.

Now she has written about her incredible life in *Get Up, Dress Up, Show Up: Lessons in Love and Surmounting Grief*.

In the book, she charts her journey from Australia to London. After being rejected by The Australian Ballet, aged 18, she climbed on board the SS Canberra and sailed to London, in the Swinging Sixties. The city was awash with Aussies, including Clive James, Germaine Greer and Barry Humphries.

“It was a time of Australia taking over the world – we were very fashionable,” she says from her home in London.

“We were gung-ho and noticeable, because we were so loud.”

But London in the 1960s was a shock to the young Aussie, not least because her lodgings weren't heated, meaning she went to bed fully-clothed and woke up with ice on the inside of her window. One landlady informed her she was allowed “two baths a week”.



“It was an experience that left me with a lifelong fear of being cold,” she says.

“I just thought, ‘These English people are weird. They don't mind the cold or not having a shower every day.’ But I just got on with it.”

And get on with it she did, eventually landing a contract with Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet and, afterwards, teaching at The Royal Ballet School. She danced all over the world, alongside some of the biggest names, including Fonteyn, saying, “I was enthralled by her ... and her ability to entrance an audience.”

She also worked alongside Aussie ballet icon Robert Helpmann.

“He would often float through the rehearsal rooms in Sadler's Wells,” she says.



“

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“I certainly wasn't his friend – you know, that wit made you terribly wary.”

Another dancer with a legendary sharp tongue, was Nureyev who, Petal details in her book, once made an X-rated comment to her, to which the no-nonsense Aussie saucily answered back. Afterwards, he had a soft spot for her.

“He was mischievous,” she says.

“He got away with it because he was so talented and so attractive. Everyone was in love with him. Everyone. And I was fortunate to be on stage with him and had a couple of funny encounters.”

As Petal's dreams of dancing on a world stage began to come true, so did her love life and she married her first husband, Michael Brown, a



fellow dancer from Perth, in the 1960s. The pair had a deep connection, she says, but it was a love for a different time and Michael eventually came out. He later died of AIDS in 1990, with Petal at his side.

"It's rare you meet another human being that you connect with in such a deep, meaningful, wonderful way," she says.

"Life was full of expectation ... and then came AIDS."

Petal found love again, marrying renowned principal dancer David Ashmole, who became senior principal artist for The Australian Ballet and the pair moved to Australia in the 1980s.

Sadly, it was here they lost their much-longed-for baby and chance to be parents. Petal

threw her energy into creating the enchanting Snugglepot and Cuddlepie ballet in 1988.

"David was crushed, but I said to him, 'Darling, we've got hundreds of children,'" she says. They tried to adopt, but were turned down on the grounds of being too old, in their 40s, something Petal is still furious about.

"I was angry and insulted," she says, explaining they had a lovely home, finances and income, but it wasn't to be.

"But you know, I did Snugglepot and we just adopted everybody else's children," she says.

However, more tragedy was to come when David was diagnosed with lung, bone and liver cancer, and in 2009 Petal again found herself at her husband's side when he died.

“*I need to feel warmth in my bones. I've had a damned good innings*”

Petal Ashmole, main picture, dancing in Les Sylphides, Royal Sadler's Wells Ballet, London, 1976; rehearsal at Sadler's Wells, 1980, above; reminiscing, top; and with her beloved dog Winston, far left.

"Looking back at my years with David I cannot recall a time when we were not attracted to each other and in love. I'm very sure of this, because my torturous ache for him lasted for such a long time after he died," she says.

Ballet dancers are renowned for their incredible strength – the grace you see on stage belying the unbelievable effort. And so, with Petal – after being widowed twice, she decided to have another go at this thing called love when she met Scottish architect Simon Winstanley.

"I knew I was longing for tenderness. And I knew at 70, it was not going to knock on my door. I needed to find it," she says. Sadly, yet again, it was not to last, as he too died, of oesophageal cancer in 2021.

Once again, Petal was by his side, her final act, to marry him. Describing his last days, when he would communicate by squeezing her fingers, she says: "Off we'd go, whispering words of love known only to us. I have those words locked away inside my head, on call whenever I need to remember my darling Simon.

"It felt so cruel. But I chose three wonderful men to love me; good partnerships that have underpinned me."

And so, she decided to share her journey in her book, in the hope of helping others going through grief.

Now Petal is preparing for another journey – returning home, to Australia.

"I need to feel warmth in my bones and be with my family," she says. "I've had a damned good innings in the city."

Bravo.

Get Up, Dress Up, Show Up, by Petal Ashmole Winstanley, Grosvenor House Publishing, \$37