

Labassa *lives*

Volume 7, Issue 3, 2019

Tribal happenings

Jane Clifton 1971–73



Above: Jane Clifton. One of many publicity shots taken at Labassa by resident Peter Johnson.

Jane Clifton's memoir, *The Address Book*, includes a fulsome chapter on her love affair with Labassa and its 'motley' collection of residents.¹ In an eventful two-year residency, some Labassa tales did not make the final edit. Among these was the involvement of Tribe, an avant-garde performance troupe that performed at La Mama, the Pram Factory and in the streets from around 1969 to 1972.

Tribers had a history of living and working together. Apart from Labassa they shared accommodation in other old mansions in Toorak and South Yarra. Jane moved into Flat 1 (Upstairs Servants' quarters) with Peter and Sandy Sinnott in March 1971 when she was a student at Monash university.

¹ Jane Clifton, *The Address Book*, Penguin, 2011.



After Sandy and Peter departed, Triber Fay Mokotow moved in. Tribers Carol Porter and Alan Robertson occupied the downstairs flat (Flat 9, Servant's Hall flat). Tribe sometimes rehearsed in Labassa's backyard and Jane's photos of one rehearsal are a reminder of the extraordinary actors, writers and directors that made Melbourne's theatre scene of the 1970s so electrifying.

Jane's photos of Labassa itself are also a remarkable record of the mansion's condition prior to the Trust buying the property in November 1980. Many of the architectural features captured by Jane have since been restored while modifications made after 1920 have largely disappeared.

Like other artists, Jane used Labassa as a backdrop for other creative ventures and publicity shots. Many of these photos were taken by photography student Peter Johnson who was living in Flat 6 (Upstairs Balcony flat). His portraits reveal the many faces of Jane as an emerging actor.

Although Jane's tenancy was relatively brief, she says "it left a lasting impression on my subconscious and is the address to which I return most often in my dreams."

A book of poetry written and illustrated by Jane, *A Day At A Time – In Rhyme* published by Little Fox Press, is out in November, 2019 and available through select bookstores and amazon.com.au

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Tribal happenings (cont.)



Above: Tribe girls rehearsing. Left to right: Jan Cornall, Jan Bucknall, Fay Mokotow, Carol Porter. *Photo:* Jane Clifton.



Above: Left to right: Jan Bucknall, Mandy Pearce, Fay Mokotow, Jan Cornall, Carol Porter. *Photo:* Jane Clifton.



Above: Flat 8's bathroom and kitchen annexe in the rear courtyard was demolished by the Trust in the 1980s. While largely intact, the stained glass window above has a broken pane and shows signs of weathering. *Photo:* Jane Clifton.



Above: Western perspective of Labassa showing the shadow of a missing external staircase and the boarded up 'door to nowhere'. *Photo:* Jane Clifton.



Clouds on the ceiling

Peter Johnson: early 1971 to May 1973



Above: Peter Johnson with his beloved Triumph motorbike. *Photo:* Olga Kohut.

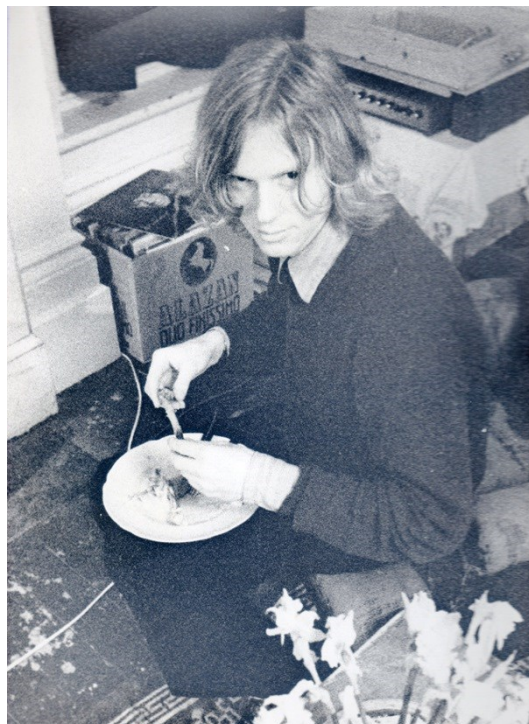
The first time I saw Labassa, I fell instantly in love. Artist and gallery director Simeon Kronenberg had taken me to visit his friend, actor Jane Clifton in her Servants' Quarters flat, and I was struck by the eccentric over-the-top finishes, the large airy volumes of the common spaces, the stairs, and the stained glass. I was also touched by the people I met. There seemed to be an immediate warmth in the house on entering. It was a welcoming place. As soon as there was a vacancy, a friend of Jane's let me know and I went straight to LJ Hooker. It was ours at once and we promptly made arrangements to move from a less than salubrious old building in Elwood. I remained at Labassa until mid '73, when I left for London and as yet unknown adventures.

Flat 6 had two rooms; mine was the corner room overlooking the balcony. A spacious, airy, room it had a fireplace and four windows. I remember a wonderful, light-filled space that caught the early morning sun; a place where I would lie in bed and study indistinct landscapes on the ceiling.

We used the eastern balcony to sit and read. Not so much the south side. Less sunlight and the only view was the ugly blonde brick house that stood out front.

In 1971, Melbourne still had horse-drawn milk carts. If I was doing an all-nighter, finishing a college assessment project, I would hear the horse clip-clop into Manor Grove in the early hours of the morning. The jingle of bottles as they joggled reminded me I should have some sleep before daylight. If I close my eyes, I can still hear that sound today.

My friend John Kidman took the second room, also with a fireplace and window. We were both students. I was studying photography at Prahran College, the first year with Gordon DeLisle as head of school, and then with the charming Athol Smith. Paul Cox was one of the lecturers; they were exciting times. Meanwhile John was doing his Dip.Ed. at Monash University. John was a maths genius with an honours degree from University of Queensland, loved VFL games at the MCG, and played chess like a demon. Scrabble we both enjoyed. We had both played in a rock band while at Toowoomba Grammar, he on vocals, me on bass. Sadly, I was with him when he died of cancer in Cleveland, Ohio at the age of 41.



Above: John Kidman. *Photo:* Peter Johnson.

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Clouds on the ceiling (cont.)

Above: Olga Kohut in the Tower. *Photo:* Peter Johnson.

I met Olga Kohut six months after we moved in, and she eventually joined me in the corner room. The three of us always ate in the front room. We put rugs on the bare boards to create some warmth and occasionally used the fireplace. Lugging timber or briquettes up from Armadale station was laborious, so more often we lit a kerosene heater.

One night, I brought home a mallee root – a beautiful gnarled twisted root – but it was impossible to chop with an axe, and equally impossible to light with newspaper. Fortunately we were young, so the cold was bearable. And the mallee root remained as a thing of beauty.

The rent was only \$16 a week, but we were students, so splitting the rent three ways helped. I worked as a bus driver at night driving a bus from Elsternwick to Princes Bridge, Route 605. Then home to Labassa and dinner by 8.30pm. At weekends I worked for a soft drink manufacturer in Footscray.

My memory is that I handed over the rent in cash to the 'caretaker' as he was described, although I didn't ever see him doing any actual caretaking.

Our kitchen was a skinny room next to the upstairs bathroom, fitted with only a gas stove and sink. I put in an old dresser and some shelves to make it a working kitchen, albeit a tiny one. I suspect it had originally been a linen press or utility room, positioned as it was next to the magnificent master bathroom. We had to breathe in to pass each other.

I had always loved to cook, as had Olga. She was of Ukrainian heritage, and from her cooking, I developed a lifelong love of that food. My own speciality was Spanish and Indian food. We produced wonderful meals from that tiny kitchen and it, along with my childhood spent helping out in my family's northern English kitchen (the warmest room in the house), was perhaps an early inspiration for my life as a food photographer.

Our spacious bathroom doubled as my dark room. The enlarger was on a table opposite the shower. I made a wooden rack to go over the bath for developing trays, and the bath itself was the water bath for finished prints. As the window looked onto an internal light well, it was never bright, so I could print at night without having to black out the window.



Above: Peter Johnson's neighbours Vera and Fred Halford. *Photo:* Peter Johnson.

Clouds on the ceiling (cont.)

Our flat wasn't exactly secure. The bathroom and kitchen doors couldn't be locked, and at first there was no door on the corridor leading to our bedrooms.¹ When there were parties downstairs, I'd often hear people exploring outside my room while I lay in bed. Flat 3 opposite already had a door, so I talked to LJ Hooker and they covered the cost of lumber for a frame, a door (\$20) that matched the other door quite well, and a lock. My father, a joiner, helped me erect the frame and install the door to create a private hallway. The new door made both flats more secure and we used the extra space as storage, especially once Olga moved in, as she had more clothes than either of us.

I did climb the partition a couple of times when the tenants in Flat 3 were out. I didn't enter their private rooms, but found the stairway to the tower and went up. It was dusty and empty but with a wonderful view. At different times, our friends – including painter Ian Smith (who was also at Prahran) and musician Chris Stafford – slept in the tower until they found somewhere to call home.

I loved the eccentricity of the house, and its residents. There were lesbians, gays, creatives, actors and a strong bond of friendship among us all. Despite little security, there were few problems with strangers in the house. More often there was a buzz of noise and activity – residents moving around, talking, noisy footsteps from the girls below in their RMs, calls from one to another from kitchens, music heard from opening and shutting doors.

Jane Clifton was someone we saw often. I did some headshots for her agent in return for a cloth bag she embroidered for me. She often leaned out of her window into the courtyard and played Rod Stewart's *Maggie May* at full volume. My anthem was Van Morrison's *Astral weeks*. I shot a Prahran College project with Jane and Simeon Kronenberg in Judith Cordingley's flat [Dining Room, Flat 8, see above image].

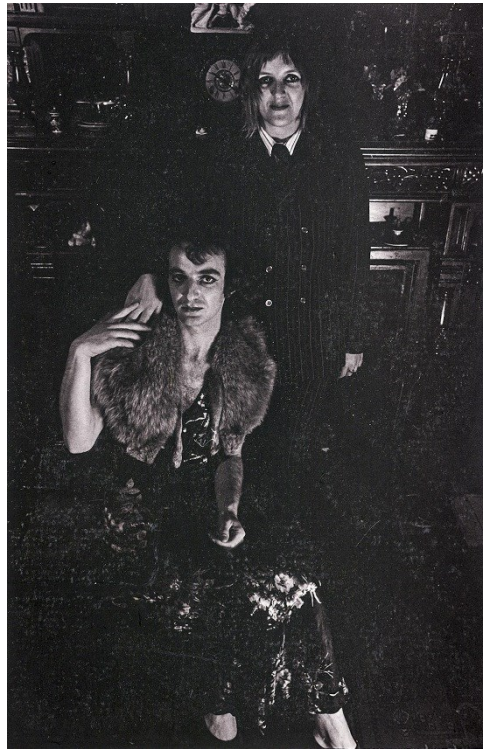
It was titled 'A Sequence', and featured them posing for a 'Victorian' portrait. Simeon started in my pin-striped suit, Jane in her vintage dress and fox fur, and over the sequence of ten shots, they gradually swapped clothes and positions. It was almost a story of residents of the house.

There was often a party in the house — we couldn't help but hear them. We hosted a few ourselves and invited everyone we knew. One night an alleged ex-resident stole a large black cast-iron casserole pot full of potatoes and onions from the open kitchen. I looked outside and saw it in the cab of a truck, so I called the police and it was promptly returned. The thief feigned drunkenness and claimed not to know what he had done. During another party before our new front door was installed, there were footsteps outside our rooms and my enlarger was taken from the unlockable bathroom. Aside from those minor mishaps, the only thing I disliked about Labassa was the ugly brick box in front. As an ex-architecture student, its abysmal design horrified me. They had a small poodle that yapped constantly when it was out in the concrete backyard. I seemed to

have more condoms than were necessary, so filled them with water and lobbed them over the balcony at the dog. Never quite hit it, but they burst on impact, showering water around and causing the dog to yap more.

Labassa remains a wonderful memory. I was in my early twenties – learning, growing, finding out who I was and what direction I might take, making friends, cooking, entertaining, sharing with Olga and John, and riding my beloved Triumph motorbike. I recall waking up in that large, light-filled room and appreciating that this was not how most people lived. Labassa was inhabited by interesting and far from normal people. Living there allowed me to be myself and not conform to brick veneer standards. I loved it.

¹ The upstairs hallway was divided down the middle by a partition thus separating flats 6 and 3. As the partition did not go to the ceiling, tenants could climb over.



Absolute wonder

One of the most pivotal years in the Labassa story is 1974. In October that year, Labassa appeared on the first Victorian Register of Historic Buildings as one of 370 privately owned buildings to be protected from demolition. Architect Halina Eckersley, now deceased, was working for the then Historic Buildings Preservation Council when the application to add Labassa crossed her desk. This is an extract from an article published in Labassa Quarterly in 1997 describing her first impressions of the mansion and its residents.

"Eckersley's first impression of the house was of absolute wonder – not its opulence, but at the very fact it had survived at all. She noticed, for example, that the wooden partitions put in to split the house into flats curved round mouldings; that the original filler papers and dados were largely intact, that the ornate fireplaces were relatively undamaged; that the curved glass and original mirrors had survived. The tenants were brimming with information about various aspects of the house; their love of the house was obvious – it almost seemed they were more concerned about the house than their own comfort. They saw themselves, in the seeming absence of any care on the part of the landlord, as guardians or custodians of this grandiose example of Marvellous Melbourne.

As she left Labassa, the venal agent, who did not see in the hippies the qualities she saw, remarked, "Tell me if you want a flat here – I'll just put out the tenant of the room of your choice."

In 1995, Eckersley returned to Labassa as a Consultant Architect to Labassa's Management Committee, headed by Kingsley Davis. She had been doing other work for the National Trust's properties manager, who then suggested she see what she could make of Labassa's problems. Eckersley was called upon to attend to a minor defect, 'moisture penetration in one spot'. She was taken right through the building, including through the Mansard roofs. At first, it was thought the problem was a mere matter of guttering, but she discovered soon enough she would need to draw on her twenty years' work in heritage conservation and historical research. Her initial tour confirmed that Labassa posed an enormous problem for conservation and restoration. Nevertheless, she could also see that with support, determination and expertise, all these problems were surmountable.



Above: Prior to National Trust ownership tenants, including John Harland, carried out ad hoc repairs to the roof. In 1976, architect Brendan Farrelly was invited to inspect the roof and provide advice on what remedial action the tenants could take. **Photo:** John Harland.

One of Labassa's abiding problems is the expectation that everything is at last all fixed up. Eckersley remembers when she sat on the Financial Assistance Committee of the Historic Buildings Council, it was assumed that the money allocated for fixing Labassa's roof was enough and that would be the end of the problem. For Eckersley, it is of paramount importance to make sure that the relevant authorities are made aware of the magnitude of the problems faced by Labassa's custodians.

Early renovation work to the flashing of the roof, for example, in stainless steel – a non-traditional method with merit – failed due to poor workmanship. Often, even the best of architects are let down in this way.

One of the biggest problems has been to rectify the water problems to the south-west wall in the Drawing Room. This room had been restored in the early 1980s by the National Trust, only to be severely damaged later. The good news is the leak has been capped..."

¹ Halina Eckersley, 'The Three Rs: restoration, renovation & reconstruction (= Conservation!)', *Labassa quarterly*, December 1996 February 1997, p. 4.

Peter Hansen's Blessing Christ

Only a handful of works by Ontario's Danish art decorator, Peter Hansen, has survived in original condition. A signed Hansen work in good condition has been located in the Lutheran Church at Warrayure near Hamilton, Victoria.

Hansen's painting of 'the Blessing Christ' is based on a sculpture by Danish master Bertel Thorvaldsen. It was commissioned as an altar piece for the opening of the church in 1909. Significantly, the painting was completed in the workshop of Jaan Kannuluik who built the altar, pulpit and church furniture.



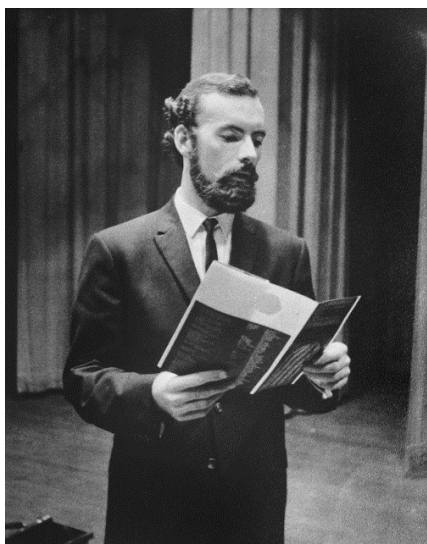
Above: Hansen's 'Blessing Christ' representing a vision of the Saviour with outstretched arms on the globe and shedding light into the outer darkness.

The Hansen and Kannuluik working relationship was strengthened when they married the Fankhauser sisters, Anna and Caroline in the early 1890s. Their marriages were performed by Pastor Herman Herlitz of the Lutheran Church, East Melbourne, where Ontario's 1890 architect John Koch was also a parishioner.

The brothers-in-law worked on many commissions together, increasing the likelihood that Kannuluik contributed to Ontario's carpentry.

Thanks to Trinity Lutheran Church Warrayure for welcoming us to their church and providing copies of their records.

Vale Lindsay Moore



Lindsay Moore's modest recounter to a compliment about his musical talents was almost always "one does one's best". Most appropriately, his home in 1963 was Labassa's Music Room flat (Flat 2).

Lindsay discovered Labassa through the Caulfield Technical College network where he was an English lecturer and musical director for college revues.

An accomplished composer and pianist, he also collaborated with writer/director Peter Homewood on several revues around Melbourne. Peter Homewood 'inherited' Lindsay's flat after he moved out.

Left: Lindsay Moore, who passed away in February 2019.

His story was published in *Labassa Lives* in Vol. 5. No.1, 2017.

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Contributions, corrections, information, comments and articles are welcome.

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Private Lives: Labassa's artists

Friday 10th January 2020, 7pm–9pm



Left: Resident Louise Lovely who achieved international fame as a star of the Silver Screen.

Photo:
National Library of Australia.

From grand opera to punk rock, from surrealist film to ceramic sculpture, Labassa has embraced it all. In the 1960s and 1970s the mansion was home to an artistic community of painters, writers, actors and musicians who drew inspiration from their magnificent surroundings.

The Private Lives experience begins with refreshments in the Drawing Room followed by a guided tour of those rooms with a particularly strong artistic heritage.

Painter Stephen Hall has a “great big little story of survival and inspiration” to tell. Filmmaker John Laurie recalls the days when “we were beatniks and drank claret”. Jenny Gibson tells the story behind the Tower’s inclusion in Kenneth Slessor’s poem *Fives Bells* and how singer songwriter Hans Poulsen used its heights for band rehearsals.

Tour groups return to the Drawing Room to learn about its artistic heritage and hear Howard Watkinson’s eye-witness account of the most spectacular theatre production mounted by Labassa’s resident artists.

Bookings essential through Trybooking.com
Adult: \$35. Concession \$30.

Forthcoming Open Days and events

Open days 10.30am–4pm

2019

November 17 Open Day
December 8 Christmas opening

2020

January 10 Private Lives: Labassa’s artists
January 19 Open Day
February 16 Melbourne International Millinery Competition display
March 15 Open Day
April 19 Open Day
May 17 Heritage Festival Open Day
June 21 Open Day
July 19 Open Day
August 16 Open Day
September 20 Open Day
October 18 Open Day
November 8 40th anniversary of the National Trust’s purchase of Labassa at auction
November 15 Open Day
December 6 Christmas at Labassa



Join the Christmas spirit at Labassa on Sunday 8 December, 10.30am–4pm, with special performances by the Five Winds Quintet and vocal groups Elwood Community Choir and Mood Swing.

The Five Winds Quintet performs in the morning with works by Mozart, Beethoven and Grieg as well as lesser known pieces such as the early Hungarian dances of Ferenc and the Peter Warlock Capriol Suite.

In the afternoon the Elwood Community Choir and Mood Swing perform something for everyone with uplifting songs in a wide range of styles from Greece, South Africa, Australia and America.

Seasonal treats will be on offer in the Servants’ Hall from 10.30am–3.30pm. Visitors can take a guided tour of the Tower (gold coin donation) and self-guided tour of the mansion.

National Trust members: Free,
Adults: \$15; Concession: \$12; Children: \$9;
Family (2 adults + 2 children): \$35.