

Labassa *lives*

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Private lives: Louise Lovely



Left: Louise Lovely at Whernside mansion for the filming of *Jewelled Nights*.
Above: Louise at WOC Radio Davenport, Iowa, 1922. **Photos:** NFSA.

When Louise Lovely, star of the silver screen, took up residence in 1936 there was much excitement. Her Hollywood heydays were over but she still made occasional stage appearances, did paid product testimonials and was a star attraction at charity balls. How did such a famous, glamorous woman accord with Labassa's sedate and mostly elderly household?

Journalists often commented on Louise's charming manner and lack of pretension. Her voice, her appearance, her manner were all "thoroughly Australian". One writer concluded that: "Though she comes with a world-wide reputation Miss Lovely is entirely unspoiled. She is petite, vivacious, and frankly friendly."

Louise was also a 'homebird'. She was an expert cook, loved flowers but hated to pick them, adored children and simple but good frocks and animals. Louise's menagerie included two dogs called "Lou Love" and "Mitel"; her tabby cat was "Timmie".

Louise's husband Bert Cowen, manager at St Kilda's Victory picture theatre (now the National Theatre), was also well known within theatre circles.

As general manager of J. C. Williamson Films Ltd in 1918, he managed many of Melbourne's movie houses including the Paramount, Star, and Strand. In 1921 he added the Union Theatres group to his portfolio, including the Majestic, Melba, Britannia, and Empress (Prahran). At the time of his marriage to Louise, Bert was set to become the inaugural manager of the newly completed Regent and Plaza theatres in Collins Street Melbourne.

Bert is Labassa's first-known tenant of Chinese heritage. Cowen (sometimes misspelt as Cowan) is an anglicised version of his family name Hi Cowe.

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Private lives: Louise Lovely (cont.)

Above: Bert Cowen (left) and Louise Lovely (right) visit actress Estelle Taylor (centre) on location during their honeymoon in America.

Photo: *Everyone's* magazine, 13 March 1929.

His father, Ti Kow, operated a business in the heart of Melbourne's Chinatown. Bert's English-born mother, Maria Walsh, was 18 when she married 46-year-old Ti Kow. Bert was known within his family as Gook Wah.

How Bert became a prominent figure in the 'picture business' is a story yet to be uncovered. He likely acquired his financial skills as a young storeman and then as treasurer to William Anderson, a theatrical entrepreneur. Bert also had a flair for promotional gimmicks. For the Shirley Temple musical *Stowaway* he engaged Shirley Temple impersonators to sing and dance to the accompaniment of Charles Rainsford and his orchestra. For the comedy film *Pepper* Bert advertised that every "kiddie who brought along an empty pepper tin" would get a prize. He received 600.

Bert and Louise may have crossed paths on the live theatre circuit when Louise, then known as Louise Carbasse or Nellie Carbasse, was a vaudeville actress. They would certainly have met in 1924 when Louise toured Union theatres to promote her movie *Jewelled Nights*.

Louise, whose mother came to Australia with Sarah Bernhardt's Australian tour in 1890, began her stage career at the age of nine. At 17 she married fellow actor Wilton Welch. Wilton was gay but the couple formed a professional partnership and remained married until 1926 when Louise began divorce proceedings. Suing for restitution of conjugal rights was considered the quickest way to secure a divorce and this had the added benefit of avoiding a scandal and criminal charges.

Louise and Bert Cowen married at a private registry service the same day her divorce from Wilton Welch was declared decree absolute. Wilton was already in England where he continued his stage career until just after the Second World War.

While on their honeymoon in the United States, Bert succeeded in convincing nearly 40 screen stars including Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks to make impressions of their feet and hands in blocks of concrete. These returned with the Cowens ready for installation in the lobby of the Regent theatre. What became of these impressions is unknown.

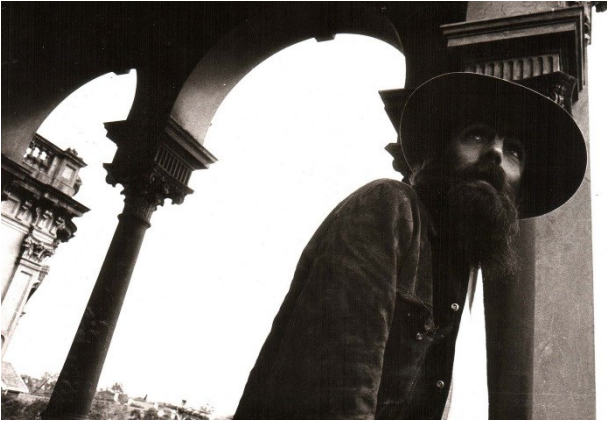
Bert and Louise likely chose the Willas flats not only for its proximity to the Victory theatre but because it was brand new, with all conveniences and had an upstairs sunroom overlooking Labassa's rear garden.

Mr and Mrs Cowen were remembered by the children of Manor Grove for their kindness. If Bert saw one of the children at the Victory he would let them in for free. Louise took a particular interest in a precocious Barry Jones who lived across the road at the Ontario Flats. Around 1946 the Cowens moved to Hobart where Bert managed the Prince of Wales Theatre while Louise ran the lolly shop next door.



Above: Louise Lovely, aged 74, feeding gulls in a park, 1969. **Photo:** Unknown photographer, National Portrait Gallery.

So what did happen to Boris?



Above: Boris at Labassa, c.1969.

Photo: Penny Carruthers.



Above: A recent photo of Boris. *Photo:* Boris Branwhite.

An *Age* article about *Labassa: House of Dreams* in late 2020, posed the question – whatever happened to 1969 tenant Boris, also known as ‘Rasputin’? Within a few hours of the article going online, several of his friends made contact and Boris was found within minutes. Having the correct spelling of his name – Alan Branwhite – made it much easier.

Boris who lives in NSW says he is now “a highly awarded community environment scientist researcher”. He confirmed at the time he lived at Labassa, he was an artist’s model, did lightshows, pyro for stage gigs, promotions and was setting up a perfume business.

Boris’s mystique evolved out of his theatrical appearance and stories of offbeat behaviour. One story had him being kicked out of the Hell’s Angels for refusing to fight. Boris says: “I rode with the Melbourne Angels in 1967–8 but then I was drafted

into the army and transferred away. When I got back to Melbourne in 1969 the Angels’ pub had been demolished and the club had closed down. The Hell’s Angels were not in Australia then.”

At Labassa, Boris’s signature black top hat, black-tailed coat and a white lace shirt made him stand out in a crowd. Was the Nazi flag in his room also for effect or perhaps a political statement? Boris explains: “The Nazi flag was one of the props I used for movie promotions for Village Theatres and so was the top hat and cape costume.”

The legend continues with a new story from a friend who visited Boris at Labassa. On arriving at the mansion, he discovered Boris had undergone yet another transformation. Boris’s experiment with hair dye had gone badly wrong and his long beard and luxuriant head of hair were now a blazing orange.

Right family wrong house

The house in the background of this photo (right), taken in February 1907, has often been mistaken as Labassa. The house is actually Glanmire mansion in St Kilda Road, Melbourne, which survived until 1954 when it was sold as a development site.

The bride is Georginia Watson Cooper, niece of Labassa’s owners John Boyd Watson II and Flora Kate Watson. Their young daughters Daphne and Hinemoa were trainbearers at the wedding.

In 1909, Georginia would inherit a large income from the estate of her grandfather, the late John Boyd Watson I. His will directed that his estate be shared among his children for 20 years and thereafter among his grandchildren. The loss of income from his father’s estate may explain why J. B. Watson II put Labassa up for sale in 1910.



Labassa: a changing landscape

By Elizabeth Peck

Elizabeth Peck is a Landscape Architect. In 2012, she was a guest at a dinner in Labassa's Drawing Room for the Board of the National Trust of Australia (Victoria). Conversation turned to Labassa's landscape and the need to create a garden that would complement the mansion. Elizabeth generously offered to design and prepare a landscape Masterplan. The fruits of that plan can now be seen in a garden that is both elegant and lush.

Gardens and landscapes are ever changing. Gardens need constant attention to encourage and train their development, and care to look after their health and beauty.

Labassa's garden epitomises the fluctuating fortunes of garden making. The mansion itself has experienced the heights of both grandeur and Melbourne's social life to gradual loss of glamour and status, moving into a different world of bohemia, and then neglect. Likewise, a garden's form can be reduced to a shadow of its maturity, by the cut of a saw, the stroke of a bureaucrat's pen, the rumble of merciless machinery, demise through fading interest.

Such is the life story of Labassa's garden, thus far.

During the Billing era (1862-82) the garden/estate of 5 hectares of pastoral land was acquired in the Caulfield district. Views to the city, Port Philip Bay, the Dandenongs and the You Yangs from the elevated site spoke of 'Sylliot Hill' as a distinguished landmark.

By the 1880s Marvellous Melbourne was booming, and after the death of Mr Billing, the mansion was purchased by Alexander W. Robertson, a successful businessman, co-owner of Cobb and Co., and a Riverina station owner. The cement brolgas positioned along the parapet were a reminder of these graceful Plains' birds.

'Ontario' became the most notable estate in the district, with distant views, grand front gates, a sweeping drive through maturing trees and shrubs to reach an elegant arrival forecourt, sweeping lawns, garden beds, an ornate fountain and grotto, tennis court and pavilion, a beautiful conservatory, stables, pond, large vegetable gardens and orchard, and 'pleasure grounds'. The estate was now bounded by Balaclava Road, Orrong Road and Inkerman Road, and what is now Ontario Street to the east.

George Cooper, Ontario's skilled garden designer was regarded far and wide for his professional approach to plant collecting, selection and propagating.



Above: Labassa during the Watson era, c.1916.

Photo: Peter Watson.

He nurtured exotic species and coaxed unusual plants as was fashionable in the Victorian era. The planting diversity now included conifers, palms, flowering trees and shrubs, exotic tropical plants, an array of perennials and annuals and Australian natives. The conservatory displayed orchids, tropical plants and ferns. Time and funds were not a barrier to developing and maintaining a grand full-scale and flourishing garden.

The Watsons renamed the property Labassa and their era (1904-1919) saw the beginning of the estate's subdivision, dissected by new local streets including Labassa Grove, Ontario Street and Pearson Street and then in 1920, Manor Grove itself. The fortunes of Labassa became beholden to change, and deterioration. The maturing garden and landscape reversed direction.

Over the next few decades, the mansion's occupancy changed, and tenants occupied self-contained flats. Gone were the grand front gates, the fountain, grotto, and surrounding gardens. Nowadays, like the tower, glimpsed from Orrong Road and side streets, large remnant trees can be picked out within the surrounding suburbia.

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Labassa: a changing landscape (cont.)

These include Cedars, Canary Island palm, *Washingtonia* sp, Norfolk Island pine, Moreton Bay fig, Liquidambers, Tulip tree and Eucalypts.

Decades of garden neglect have elapsed. Garden space has been further reduced through the building of flats to the west in 1958 and a house within metres of the mansion in the early 1960s. Funds and dedicated gardeners became a far off dream. Through the early 2000s, as refurbishment continued slowly within the mansion, it became obvious that the isolated house needed a garden to complement it.

It wasn't until 2012 that the National Trust of Australia (Vic) agreed to draw up a landscape Masterplan. An overall and disciplined approach was needed to renew Labassa's landscape. Once the NTA Board approved a Masterplan for the landscaping of the garden, it took several years to find the necessary funds to carry out staged landscape works. To guide the new design and plant selection, cues were taken from early photos in the State Library archives, newspaper reports from the 1890s, and comparison with similar notable mansions of the time. Reference to the original MMBW plan highlighted the importance of the spacious arrival forecourt, the drive and some path systems. There would be no vegetable garden and orchard areas, nor pleasure garden area typical of Labassa's late 19th century fame.

A landscape concept should give Labassa a redefined sense of place within this incompatible suburbia. The garden's new role is to regain some sense of a bygone era, provide shade, texture, some colour, spaces to move through and enjoy, practical spaces to suit our contemporary world.

The concept proposals included paths to encircle the house, disabled entry from the car park and Manor Grove to the formal front door, an elegant open forecourt, usable area for outdoor social and fund raising functions, reference to typical original planting, garden beds for picking flowers, screening plants to hide the close neighbouring flats and houses, a car-park for National Trust staff and volunteers, demolition of the brick garages to open up garden space, securing the property with new front gates off Manor Grove, and off Orrong Road. Demolition of the adjacent 1936 tenancy flats to open up outdoor space for events and allow the mansion to stand grandly alone once again, was a contentious issue.



Above, top: Works in progress in Labassa's front forecourt.

Above, bottom: At the rear, where building materials and randomly parked cars scarred the site, installation of a retaining wall enabled a flat lawn to be created, allowing space for events and open green space. As well, a new car park would be screened from the mansion and garden.

Photos: Elizabeth Peck.

Furthermore, this garden must now become resilient to withstand an increasing harsher climate.

Landscape works began in 2014 with the installation of the front forecourt. Designed to withstand vehicles including film crew trucks and equipment, the limestone toppings area was edged with simple corten steel to also define the adjacent lawn. A drainage system was installed. At the rear of the mansion a flat lawn to the west was created across the sloping site by introducing a retaining wall, itself screening the carpark.

Garden beds and paths were edged with corten, continuing the simple neat edging effect. Although a pile of u-shaped garden drainage terracotta edging was found on site, there was only enough to edge one bed, as an example of historical use.

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Labassa: a changing landscape (cont.)

Carefully chosen trees and shrubs were planted to give a sense of scale and history, including Bull Bay Magnolia, Atlantic cedar, Chinese windmill palm, Lilypilly, Kentia palm, Illawarra Flame tree, Agave, Abutilon, Camellia, Echium, Chaenomeles japonica, Cordyline, Lord Howe Island dietes, Kniphofia, Strelitzia and Nandina sp. Not included in the new garden beds are colourful and high maintenance perennials and ground covers, found in the 'Ontario' garden. However, new plantings, in a limited way, provide picking for vases for various rooms and occasions. Another small pleasure returned.

The original tennis pavilion, still standing within the garden of a house on the opposite side of Manor Grove, was gifted back to Labassa. The pavilion retained its beautiful original woodwork. Carefully deconstructed, it was moved, stored and re-assembled to a perfect position within this new garden layout. An unexpected addition to the garden's historical life.

A gardening volunteer group now tends the garden every Monday. They keep it in excellent condition with weeding, pruning and cutting back, fertilising, mulching, edging and lawn mowing, and adding plants in keeping with the period of the mansion. All with



Above: Labassa is now framed by a graceful, restrained and leafy green garden. *Photo:* Jessica Charleston.

minimum funding and garden tools. The Trust's gardeners step in to help with large jobs when possible but their time must be spread across the Trust's various properties.

The 21st century Labassa garden is taking on a new vitality, grounded within its now different and very limited landscape. It is meeting new challenges. The garden aesthetic is an essential companion to the mansion. Both need each other to read as a Victorian heritage legacy.



Above: A section of the Boudoir's wallpaper. *Photo:* Jon Rendell.

Labassa's Ode to Nature

Open day: Sunday 21 March, 2021

10am – 4.30pm

Bookings through Eventbrite for entry to the House or House entry & Garden tour are essential. Trust members free.

Three special garden tours will be led by historian Dr Anne Vale who is an author, garden photographer and public speaker. Garden tours are strictly limited to 20 people per tour.

Labassa's richly decorated interiors and exterior are a profusion of flowers, birds and foliage. House tours will highlight the mansion's ode to nature as expressed through its decorative features.

Further details and bookings:

<https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/labassas-ode-to-nature-tickets-141241893305>



Midnight rendezvous

By Gary Spivak



Above: Gary Spivak found solace in the quiet solitude of Labassa's dimly lit hall. *Photo:* c.1994, Gary Spivak.

I quietly slipped out of bed, changed from my pyjamas into some clothes, sneaked out the back door, and rode my bicycle one-mile down Balaclava Rd to Labassa. It was midnight and I was about ten years old.

I first saw Labassa from across the road at my junior school, Grimwade House, rising mysteriously above the trees and surrounding houses. As I was allowed to walk home on my own from a young age, it did not take long for me to detour to Labassa, and the first time I saw it in around 1970 I was hooked, and the attraction of this intriguing house grew.

I had been a serial truant in my preparatory year, but I am not sure why I used to take the midnight trips some five years later. Maybe I was restless and found solace in the quiet solitude of the dimly lit main hall as the tension of my parents' deteriorating marriage slowly emerged.

In the late 1960s views of Labassa's front was blocked by a 1960s subdivision that resulted in the rear fence of a house being built to within one metre of the front verandah. To get to the front door meant walking down a narrow path between the fence and the verandah or crossing the verandah from further down Manor Grove.

At midnight the front door was always unlocked. Pushing this bejewelled, heavy door with its panels of cut, geometric, thick stained-glass, was like opening a magical door to a hidden world, an Aladdin's cave of intrigue and wonderment.

I had been a Young National Trust member since the late 1960s and used to take my Kodak Instamatic camera to the city to photograph the old buildings, many of which have long been demolished. Yet here I found an enigmatic, beautiful and a little frightening house I could visit close to my home – and it seemed like my secret.

Each room of the house was tenanted as a separate flat, but the main hall, stairs and passages to the courtyard were common areas that I could visit, without being discovered at that time of night.

I would often sit on the stairs on the left just before the stairs divided and turned back on itself to reach the first level. There I would gaze at the moonlight shining through the stained-glass window above the stair landing and find the dark menacing male face behind the young child in one of the panels disturbing and frightening. The moonlight shone through the small pieces of vividly coloured glass and threw spots of colour like a starry sky projected on the stairs and textured wallpaper.



Above: Frequent visitor, Gary Spivak often found Labassa's front door was wide open or unlocked. (Note the front door buzzer panel for the flats.)

Photo: c.1975, Gary Spivak.

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Forthcoming Open Days and events

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

Please forward to:

vickijshuttleworth@yahoo.com.au or

PO Box 363, Chadstone Shopping Centre,

Chadstone, Vic. 3148

Next Open Day: 21 March: Ode to Nature

(Bookings through Eventbrite are essential. See p.6 of *Labassa Lives* for further details.)

Labassa is normally open on the third Sunday of each month. While COVID restrictions apply, it is recommended that visitors check the Trust website for further details and updates.

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa/>

Midnight rendezvous (cont.)

On one visit I noticed a strip of wallpaper hanging by a thread from the left side of the stairs between the mid-landing and the first level. I felt sad and powerless about its likelihood of being lost. Only many years after the property was acquired by the National Trust did I understand the challenges of reproducing that missing piece of wallpaper created for Labassa's restoration.

I only once ventured to the top of the stairs, the furthest I could go, as there were several locked doors that had been added to close off and divide the first level passage and create separate flats. There were tenant noises behind these doors that frightened me. I always kept quiet so as not to disturb the imagined creatures that lurked on the first level.

On another visit I found a door open to steep and narrow stairs off the courtyard. With trepidation I ventured up them, only to find a vacant flat leading to the tower.

Standing in the tower, where a previous tenant left a grass woven mat, several of the glass window-panes to the west were missing and the cold wind was howling in. I could just make out the Bay in the distance reflecting the moonlight; it was a magical experience.

On each visit I would stay about half an hour, and when settled and ready to return home, I would ride back and slip into bed. My parents did not know about these midnight rendezvous with Labassa until I eventually told my mother when I was in my 20s.

When I was 16 (1976) a friend of my mother's, Dinah, moved into my home after my parents separated and my father moved out. Having two brothers, and always wanting a sister, I 'adopted' Dinah as my older sister, and confided in her my



Above: Gary in 2018, sitting in the same spot where he sat as a child on a midnight rendezvous.

Photo: Gary Spivak.

deepest secrets, including my midnight trips to Labassa. In an adventurous sibling pact, we would repeat the midnight visits to Labassa a number of times. I had found someone to share my 'secret' house with.

In 2018, I returned to Labassa during an open day with my new partner, Wendy. Sitting on the same spot on the stairs as she photographed the occasion, the memories came flooding back of this wondrous house that provided me with so much solace when I was a restless and curious child.