



## **A'Court: Michèle Edith**

**Born: 7 July 1961, Levin, New Zealand**

**Married: 12 July 2011, Las Vegas, USA**

**To: Jeremy Matthew Elwood (1975 - )**

### ***Michèle's parents were:***

John Stephen (1929 - 2017) & Donna Edith (nee Pengelly) (1934 - 2019)

***Michèle has 1 sibling:*** Stephen Roger (1959 - )

***Michèle has 1 daughter:*** Holly Ruth A'Court (1993 - )

and **2 grandchildren:** Ariana (2013 - ) Nukutawhiti (2017 - )

Michèle's Parents were John and Donna (nee Pengelly). They were married on 5 March 1955 at St John's Church in Wellington.

Michèle's grandparents were:

Paternal: John & Nora A'Court

Maternal: Edith Duthie

Michèle A'Court is best known as a stand-up comedian, writer and social commentator who was born and raised in Levin.

She has also been politically active all her life. Serving the community has been a family thing for many generations which can be traced back to her great-grandparents, John and Edith Rogers. They were officers in the Salvation Army, arriving here in New Zealand from England in 1914. As background to Michèle's community spirit and activism their story is included in the *Appendix (see below)*, a piece Michèle wrote for North & South magazine in December 2017.

Michèle A'Court's parents, John and Donna A'Court, moved to Levin from Wellington in 1960 with Michèle's older brother, Stephen, who was only a year old at the time. Michèle was born at the Levin Maternity Hospital a year later. John A'Court worked in clothing manufacturing and opened his own factory, A'Court Industries, in 1965 – first in the old Telephone Exchange building and then in its own premises on Queen Street from 1967 to 1986.

The family lived in Kawi Road and Michèle attended the Levin Playcentre in Paisley York St, Levin North School (1966 – 1971), Levin Intermediate (1972 – 1973) and Horowhenua College, (1974 – 1978) graduating at the end of 1978. Michèle says, "My mother had me door-knocking for various charities like Save The Children, Red Cross and IHC from a very young age."

John and Donna were active in the community – John with the Levin Lions Club and Donna with the Levin Little Theatre as an actor and also as a committee member. It was from Donna that Michèle got her love of theatre and performance. One of her first forays onto the Little Theatre stage was in 1969 as a student of the Jean Scott School of Dance in a production of Dick Whittington in which Michèle played a cat.

"My most delightful memories are of watching my mother on stage, hanging out in the dressing rooms backstage, and being allowed (if I was very well behaved) to explore the wardrobe and prop departments under the eagle eye of Trudy Black who was in charge of everything. Trudy was a stickler for good behaviour but cut me some slack because I was Donna's daughter.

The theatre was always a magical place for me. I learned then that the best view in any theatre was from the stage. My first work experience as a Wellington journalism student was a holiday placement at the Horowhenua Chronicle. I was paid \$54 for the week's work and spent it all on a frock. It was a really nice frock.

My grandmother, Edith Duthie, was a very witty woman – I think I picked up my storytelling style from her. My daughter now says my sense of humour owes a lot to AA Milne. It is, however, less suitable for children's parties than this might suggest."

As well as being involved in school drama, debating and public speaking, Michèle took speech and drama lessons with Pauline Cattell who for many years ran a small country theatre called Avonvalley at the top of the Ihakara hill. The venue attracted many iconic New Zealand performers including Sam Hunt and Bruce Mason who not only performed but who also often stayed and ran workshops for Pauline's students.

In 1979, Michèle moved to Wellington to study journalism at the polytechnic, and then completed a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English and Drama at Victoria University while also working on the student newspaper, Salient. For a time, her brother, Stephen was editor of Salient. She was also very involved in student politics and among others such causes as the anti-Springbok Tour movement, abortion law reform and marriage equality. Michèle first came to national attention as the host of award-winning children's TV show, "What Now?" and "The Video Dispatch" in the 1980s and has worked on screen ever since

including regular appearances on the hit comedy show "7 Days" since it began in 2009 and as a guest host on Three's primetime show, "The Project".

Michèle has written two bestselling books: "Stuff I Forgot to Tell My Daughter" (2015) and "How We Met" (2018) both published by Harper Collins. She has written a weekly column since 2008, first for the Stuff stable of newspapers and more recently for the NZ Woman's Weekly.



Michèle was awarded "Female Comedian of the Decade" in 2010 by the NZ Comedy Guild. Her international experience as a stand-up comedian includes work in the United States, Canada, the UK, Australia, Papua New Guinea and East Timor. She won the VAC Reilly Award for Excellence in Comedy in 2015. She regularly tours solo comedy shows around New Zealand – everywhere from opera houses to community halls, including in Levin at Levin Little Theatre. Michèle was made an Officer of the NZ Order of Merit (ONZM) in the 2023 New Year Honours for services to Comedy and Entertainment.

Michèle is a frequent voice on RNZ National's "Nine to Noon" and "The Panel" and is a sought-after contributor on commercial radio. Her television drama credits include 'Shortland St'

(Head of the DHB Helen Carson, a recurring character in 2008 & 2009), 'Go Girls' (Miriam Hirsch, mother of core cast characters, 2013) and 'A Night at the Classic' (playing Michèle, a stand-up comedian, 2011). Her theatre credits include 'Mike & Virginia' (Herald Theatre, 2011), 'The Vagina Monologues' (Hawkes Bay Opera House, 2008) and 'Mum's The Word' (national tour, 2003).

As an after-dinner speaker, event host and conference MC, Michèle's hundreds of corporate clients over the years include financial advisors, health care workers, tech specialists, safety experts, lawyers, electrical workers, travel industry professionals and scientists.

She donates her time and skills to events, particularly anything to do with raising up women and girls which is her passion. Among other things this includes writing feature articles, MCing public events, and also producing comedy shows to raise funds for community organisations such as the Auckland Women's Centre and The Aunties. It is fair to say that she is a loud and lippy feminist - and was, right from the start. She cheerfully uses whatever platforms she has to speak up for those who are less often heard. In recent years she has co-hosted a feminist podcast called "On the Rag" which also became a NZOnAir-funded video series. And, of course there is a chapter on the history of feminism in her first book.

Michèle is an Ambassador for Breast Cancer Cure. She is also the Patron of "The Aunties", a charitable trust which supports survivors of domestic violence, and of the Moving & Handling Association of NZ (MHANZ) which cares for carers in the health sector. Michèle is a proud member of Actors' Equity, and a Life Member of the NZ Comedy Guild.

A famous quote from Alice Walker's sums up her philosophy, her heritage and her upbringing:- "Activism is my rent for living on the planet."

### **Qualifications and Honours**

- 1978: ATCL (Speech & Drama – Practical)
- 1979: New Zealand Certificate in Journalism – Wellington Polytechnic
- 1983: Bachelor of Arts Degree in English and Drama at Victoria University.

### **Awards**

- 1989: Best Children's Programme Award – LIFTA for "What Now?"
- 1991: Special Recognition Award for Excellence in Presentation from the ITVA (NZ) "Choice Not Chance" video on contraception produced for secondary schools.
- 1995: Travel Writing Highly Commended Award – Cathay Pacific Media Travel Awards.
- 1997: Best Female Comedian – Chapman Tripp Theatre Awards.
- 2002: Best Laugh! Festival Show – "If You Want Me I'll Be In The Bar", NZ Comedy Guild Awards.
- 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 & 2007: Best Female Comedian – NZ Comedy Guild Awards.
- 2003: Best Industry Friend – NZ Comedy Guild Awards.
- 2005: Best Show Concept – for "Heritage 101", NZ International Comedy Festival.
- 2008: Spirit of the Festival – NZ International Comedy Festival.
- 2010: Female Comedian of the Decade – NZ Comedy Guild.
- 2015: VAC Reilly Comedy Award for Excellence
- 2023: Officer of the NZ Order of Merit (ONZM) for Services to Comedy and Entertainment in the New Year Honours.

### **Service**

- Ambassador for Breast Cancer Cure.
- Patron of "The Aunties", a grassroots charity for women and children in need
- Patron of the Moving & Handling Association of NZ (MHANZ) which cares for carers in the health sector.
- A member of Actors' Equity,
- A Life Member of the NZ Comedy Guild.



## Appendix

"Once a Soldier" – North & South December 2017

*by Michèle A'Court*

There is a photograph of my great-grandmother Edith in her Salvation Army bonnet. When I was very little, I thought all old ladies wore hats like that – a style of the time, rather than a symbol of belief.

But I have also always known about the Sallies, and that this is where my family comes from. Stropky women, mainly: a great-great-possibly-great-aunt Sarah, in demand at army meetings far and wide for her fire-and-brimstone sermons back in England; my great-grandparents, Edith and John Rogers, sent to New Zealand from Oldham more than a hundred years ago to help bolster the Army here.

John came first – a soldier's reconnoitre – before Edith and their three children joined him. They left England in 1913, arrived 1914, a long journey taken on faith. There is a photograph of them just before they left: great-grandma standing, "our Harold" and "our Ruth" on either side, my grandmother sitting in the middle. She was another Edith, and my mother and I both carry that name in the middle of ours. My daughter has been given "Ruth".

Not long after they arrived, my great-grandfather was crippled in a workplace accident in Otahuhu. Great-grandma kept body and soul together by taking in washing. So, they were always poor, but they'd hold prayer meetings in their home for the whole neighbourhood – first in Otahuhu, then Miramar, then Napier. They invited people who they knew were hungry. There would be bible readings and soup or stew.

My mother and I talk about this now – that for them, the Army was as much about social justice as it was about religion. I never met great-grandpa but I know he was quite fond of waving his hand about at election time and saying, "See this hand? I'd rather cut it off than vote Tory!" Big call for a man who could barely walk. I think of it now as his own personal version of the Salvation Army salute.

I don't know if I remember great-grandma or if I just remember her from the photos of us together on steps of her little flat. My big brother remembers her vividly - very old and blind and small, but still deferred to by everyone in the family. She lived until she was 93. Their children were all raised in the Army. As a young woman, my grandmother sang solo at corps meetings and delivered the War Cry to men in pubs. She left school at 13 to work at Wellington Head Quarters, private secretary to Colonel Walls, until she married a Sally – an artist and musician who scored the music for the local army band. Grandma left the Army in the 1950s - pushed out, really, because she divorced her husband for serial infidelity. The Army did not approve of the infidelity, but nor did they approve of the divorce. She went to other churches but her best stories were about the Army. I might have been raised on Anglican hymns but I was just as familiar with Onward Christian Soldiers and that unanswerable question, "Why should the Devil have all the good music?"

Once, when I was maybe ten-years-old, Grandma took me on a trip to Wellington and we stayed at the People's Palace on Cuba Street, a liquor-free hotel and boarding house run by

the Sallies as a shelter and as cheap accommodation for working class travellers for almost eighty years. Shared bathroom down the hall, hand basin beside the bed. I'd never seen a bedroom with a hand basin in it and thought it was a terrific idea. It was also the first time I'd ever seen my grandmother without her teeth. The people who ran the place all seemed to know who my grandmother was. I felt like I was travelling with someone famous. In her later years, Grandma would make more trips to Wellington for meetings at the Citadel – a sort of coming-home for her, I think.

And here's a thing. Every year at Christmas, the Sallies would park their truck outside our house in Levin, knowing Grandma was there with us, and belt out Christmas hymns. When I was little, I thought they parked outside everyone's house to play. It wasn't till much later that I understood they were specifically playing for Grandma. A kind of apology, or something. Maybe just letting her know they still thought of her as a soldier.

So, I wasn't raised Sally but things stick. My mother inherited that sense of social justice and passed it on. I thought of my great-grandfather and the hand he'd rather cut off than vote Tory when I MC'd the Labour Party launch last August, and how much my great-grandmother would have approved of Jacinda's message of hope. And I am beyond thrilled that The Aunties, the charity I work with, has just formed a relationship with the Salvation Army in South Auckland to support people in their emergency housing. I am not a religious person, but something works in mysterious ways.