



# Dare to be deca

When a scandal breaks out in a small town, everybody sits up to take note. This certainly was the case when Dame Leyla Lamborghini, donning her high heels and sequined satin gown, set her beautifully-manicured feet in Steytlerville to take up residence.

BY MARK HINDS

**T**he residents of Steytlerville, a small town in the Karoo, were soon to find out that their new neighbour was indeed the illegitimate daughter of the legendary Miss Sophie, from *Dinner for One*, and her butler James! After a passionate affair with an Italian Count, who invested much of his fortunes into her singing career, Leyla now finds herself on stage at the Karoo Theatrical Hotel. As star of the "*Steytlerville Follies*" dinner show, she entertains and thrills crowds with renditions of diva classics of Diana Ross, Shirley Bassey and Celine Dion. Together with pianist, host and compère Freddy Ferreri, Steytlerville Follies is an extravaganza of sequins, glitter and laughter, reminiscent of "*Le Cage aux Folles*".

Steytlerville's famous Karoo Theatrical Hotel offers theatre-lovers the opportunity to dress up and "go back in time" to enjoy a formal three-course, candle-lit dinner and show in the

sumptuous Grimaldi's Theatre Hall at the hotel," says Mark Hinds, who with partner Jacques Rabie has revived the historic hotel. Built in 1943, the Karoo Theatrical Hotel is a monument to a long-lost era of style and "elaborate simplicity. It preserves a time when life was simple and people surrounded themselves with luxuries like fine linen and decadent dining," says Rabie.

Once seated in the grand Grimaldi Theatre Hall, guests are treated to a highly -entertaining cabaret performance when Dame Leyla Lamborghini takes to the stage for a performance of "*Steytlerville Follies*." Dame Leyla (aka Jacques Rabie) is accompanied by professional entertainer and pianist Mark Hinds. "*Steytlerville Follies* is an unexpected extravaganza of sequins, glitter and laughter," says Hinds.

Offering a wealth of entertainment and good food, the Karoo Theatrical Hotel is a great place for a quick weekend "get-away," only 175 km from Port Elizabeth.

Recently the "*Follies*" did a performance in the Port Elizabeth Opera House to raise funds for the Animal Anti-Cruelty League. Not only did they manage to raise the roof of the Opera, but they also raised R40 000 for the charity.

#### BRAIN BEHIND KARROO

But where did it all begin? It started in 1958 in Johannesburg when Mark was born and, after a number of decades of 'clowning' around and performances around the globe, the "father of the Follies" has come home to Steytlerville to be a source of ongoing entertainment to audiences, once again from far and wide. With partner Jacques Rabie, Mark has found his niche and continues to sing, tell stories and play the piano.

#### THE MAN BEHIND THE (CLOWN) FACE

I was born and raised in Johannesburg where my mom was a ballet dancer who always wished that she had been a pianist. I dreamed of being a ballet dancer. I showed an early interest in the piano and was sent for lessons. I was lucky enough to be accepted at the very experimental school of art, ballet and music. Part of that wonderful package was always getting season tickets to the symphony concerts, the ballet and the opera and back then we were exposed to many a legendary conductor, soloist and performer. I had to learn a second instrument and chose the

olent

double bass. I was accepted into the SABC National Youth Orchestra.

After school I went to Spain where I had been offered a contract with the orchestra in Valladolid. On my return to Johannesburg I put my full focus into piano studies. At the same time I was employed by a German piano firm where I learned all about the technical aspects of pianos and early keyboard instruments such as the clavichord and the harpsichord. This has stood me in incredibly good stead, as I have derived the utmost pleasure from tuning, restoring and re-building pianos.

### CLOWNING AROUND

In my mid to late twenties, I fell in love with a clown (August - the silly bugger clown) who was performing in the army entertainment corps where El Debbo pretty much ran the show. His name was Conc and he was a really sadly misplaced clown who had no idea of how fine his work really was. I made a proposition which, unbeknown to me at the time, was to change my life dramatically. I offered to be his manager and expose him to a bigger world. What I hadn't bargained for is the fact that I would have to become a white face clown (Joey) in order for the concept to work. An August clown needs a Joey to



play off. That was the beginning of Cinc & Conc - musical, magical clowns.

We persuaded Starlight Cruises to provide a passage to England on the Achille Lauro, in exchange for entertainment. Cinc and Conc built up a career as clowns. During the 18 years that we worked together, we performed in Israel, Holland, Belgium, Canada, Atlanta and New York. In 1990 we created our own Circus in Cape Town, the "Dream Circus", which we later sold and returned to Europe. Here our repertoire became diverse and, besides the circus, we also did a lot of work in the big Variety theatres and ended up with contracts conceptualising and creating dinner shows (much like Madame Zingara). I hosted

the dinner shows together with my "wife"/hostess - Gloria Gray.

Every year we did a stint with a circus school in Germany where we worked with retarded, disabled and problem children. On the final days, Saturdays and Sundays, they would perform for the public. This was the most rewarding work I ever did.

I was working on one of these projects when 9/11 took place. That was the day I decided to return to Cape Town for good and start a new chapter.

### DE WATERKANT

Fortunately I had a lovely home right in the middle of Cape Town in De Waterkant, with a small theatre space for my one-man show. I called the 40-seater venue "Rive Gauche." I performed only on weekends and it worked by word of mouth and special invitation only. This is when I met my partner Jacques. He arrived as a guest, asked lots of questions and left. We met properly three months later in a bar. I was very upset after a call from Conc telling me that he had signed for another year at the circus and I decided that I needed to get out of Cape Town.

### TULBAGH

I found a tiny house in Tulbagh which was an ideal "stepping stone." Jacques gave up his job and we sat on the stoep, counted cows and drank lots of Tulbagh wine - becoming increasingly bored. By that stage we had developed a show where Jacques sang songs from the musicals and I threw in well-known classical pieces. We planned to tour around with it and we were in fact due to do a show in Tulbagh.

Every Wednesday I bought a copy of





the *Junk Mail*. For three Wednesdays in a row, a particular ad had repeatedly caught my eye. "Hotel for sale in Eastern Cape". I called the number and established that it was derelict and empty; it was a rambling single storey built in 1943, American deco-style; it was out of town on farmland and nobody was interested, so it was going on auction in two weeks' time!

We packed the car and drove off without realising that our lives were going to change drastically. The journey seemed endless and, after turning off at Willowmore, we encountered a surreal single strip concrete road with an equally surreal landscape.

### DÉJÀ VU

In Steytlerville we collected the massive bunch of keys from the sheriff. We drove up a gravel road and, as we came around a bend, there was the majestic building with Cockscomb rising up behind it. Of course I had to have a *déjà vu* - it was the building which, in my dreams, I was always on the verge of acquiring. It was utterly dusty and filthy and stood in ruin.

The following morning we returned for another inspection. A small bus arrived with people who were obviously interested in the property. That proved to be the deciding factor and I immediately called the seller. Six days later, the contract was

signed and we started packing the car... little realising the finality of that move.

Back In Steytlerville we immediately got teams of local people to help clean up. The townsfolk and farmers plagued us and recited predictions of doom and gloom. I was particularly a curiosity as I had a shaven head with a little Mohican (Tintin lookalike) and I wore leather trousers. Brett Atkins of the *Weekend Post* heard about us buying the hotel. He interviewed me over the phone and wrote a very interesting article. Thereafter we were inundated with calls and visits, pleading with us to re-open the hotel.

### RESTORED

Over the past six years we have painstakingly restored and refurbished the building. We added a 146 square metre stoep to the front of the building and in good weather this is where everyone congregates. The views are magnificent and there is always a cool breeze passing through - no matter how hot it gets. The interior is furnished in a very eclectic style - a sort of blend from colonial to Bollywood. The dining room, "Grimaldi's Theatre Hall," is a room with added volume - draped with plush velvet curtains and boasting a stage. This is where the "*Steytlerville Follies*" dinner show is presented every Saturday night. 📺

An electrifyingly surreal carnival costume party, "*Queens of the Desert*," will take place on 3 October at the Karroo Theatrical Hotel in Steytlerville. This party gives you the opportunity to visit a one-night fantasy world where you can choose to attend either as a King or a Queen.

The party is by reservation only. Vouchers are R100 each, which includes entrance fee, campsite/parking ticket, meal ticket and a drink voucher. Weekend packages are also available. Go to [www.karoohotel.co.za](http://www.karoohotel.co.za) or call 049 835 0010 or 072 424 7185 for more details on tickets, bookings and the programme.