



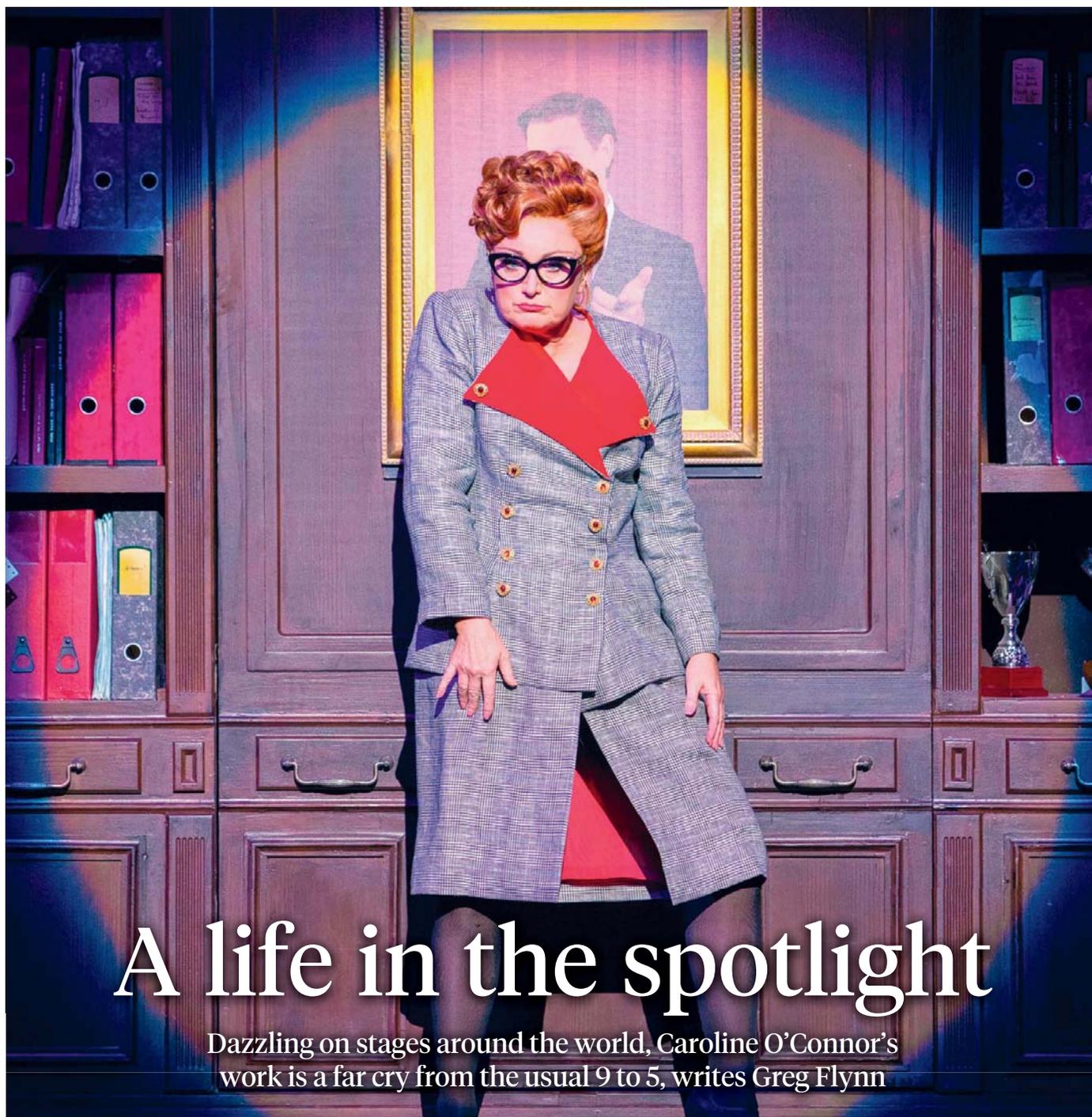
20 APR, 2022

A life in the spotlight

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Wentworth Courier, Sydney

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Dazzling on stages around the world, Caroline O'Connor's work is a far cry from the usual 9 to 5, writes Greg Flynn

The eyes have it. Irish eyes can smile, to be sure, but these are actually sparkling. Caroline O'Connor, star of 9 to 5 The Musical, is sitting in a quiet corner of Sydney's

Capitol Theatre where the iridescent royal blue lighting is failing to compete with her ice blue eyes.

She's entertaining an audience of one as she perches on the edge of a settee and

chats animatedly about Dolly Parton, Irish dancing and falling in love in the footlights to the sound of her husband-to-be's saxophone.

In the high-energy show, Caroline plays office busy-

body Roz Keith, whose passion for her boss, Franklin Hart Jr (Eddie Perfect), is unrequited and, in a comical way, undignified. As she performs a fantasy bump-and-grind dance routine



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with Eddie in her big number, Heart to Hart, her voice soars with such power it can possibly be heard in Haymarket's back streets.

That scene alone and the rapturous reaction from audiences have put paid to her initial concern that, because she's not playing the lead role, "you wonder if people are noticing".

Plus, in a reassuring piece of showbiz patter, director Jeff Calhoun told her: "No actor is defined by the size of the role."

Being a Dolly Parton admirer was also a hook to draw her into the musical.

"There's no one quite like her – she wrote the score for this show, she sings, she does charity work and there's a vulnerability, a truth, an honesty about her. She lives the way she wants to live and her talent is mind-blowing," she says.

Caroline's co-stars – Eddie, Marina Prior, Casey Donovan and Erin Clare – are also heaped with individual and collective praise.

Pre-Covid, Caroline was headhunted for the Roz part, with the producers inviting her to a performance in London's West End.

"I saw why I'd been approached," she says. "It's not just a singing comedy role, you need dance skills as well. And I love the fact Roz takes her world very seriously and isn't trying to be funny."

A workaholic – her own word – Caroline found the Covid lockdowns depressing and wondered if her career would ever restart. When the pandemic struck, she was performing in a Spiegel tent show in Chicago. The event was cancelled and she flew back to her home in Noosa, where she and musician husband Barrie Shaw had recently moved after nearly 20 years in Woollahra.

"I didn't know anybody in Noosa, I had no social network there. It was very strange," she says.

"Then in Australia all the productions were shut down and 9 to 5 was postponed. But, because I'd worked in New York quite a lot, I think the most frightening thing was seeing Broadway shuttered and deserted. That hit me the hardest. I'm a little bit addicted to my work. It makes me so incredibly happy."

Her on-stage performances began with Irish dancing. Both her parents were Irish-born and came from England to Australia as "Ten Pound Poms" (or Paddies) with four-year-old Caroline and her three siblings. Her mother, Maureen, was instrumental in starting Caroline's career. When an adjudicator at an Irish dance school in Adelaide told Maureen her daughter showed "great promise", the reaction was swift. "My mother packed up the whole family and moved us to Sydney so I could attend the Ransley School of Dance, which also taught ballet and tap."

There, Caroline grew to love ballet, with its discipline and its classical music. Her skill earned her a two-year stint at The Royal Ballet School in London.

Returning home, she performed for a year in local ballet productions before winning a role in the musical Oklahoma and the parts just kept coming.

Was there a certain moment in the 59-year-old's career when she knew musicals were where she belonged? Indeed: London, 1986, while understudying the Sally Bowles role in Cabaret. On stage, in the lights, it happened: "That was definitely the moment when I thought: 'This is what I've dreamed of all my life.' A

wonderful score, a juicy play with meat to it, and I was working with the great director Gillian Lynne."

Coincidentally, or perhaps not, there is another reason to remember the date and the show. During an understudy call in Cabaret, as she sang Maybe this Time, from out of the darkened orchestra pit drifted the gentle notes of a saxophone. Afterwards, in the dressing room, while Caroline quizzed her fellow performers about the identity of "the guy who's got the saxophone solo", the musician (spoiler alert: it was Barrie) was asking other musicians who the understudy was because "I really like the way she sounds".

Later, at a party, came a touch of real theatre when they met. "It was just like that moment in West Side Story when Maria and Tony walk towards each other at the dance in the gym. We were both, like: 'Is it you?'"

The pair have since done a number of shows together including Chicago and Anything Goes, and to borrow another song cue from Cabaret, it's Perfectly Marvelous that Barrie is in the 9 to 5 orchestra while his wife sings, pivots and gyrates to applause as the frustrated admin assistant Roz.

"I keep saying it's going to be my last year to dance and then I suddenly get swept up again into another thing," says Caroline.

Aside from talent, there could be an additional quality that keeps her in demand – her down-to-earth manner. No theatrical "luvvy", Caroline admits to being "a bit self-deprecating" and – in a broad Irish accent – quotes her late mother: "Self-praise is no recommendation."

Unsurprisingly, Maureen and husband James O'Con-



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nor were Caroline's biggest fans. Returning to the Capitol Theatre for 9 to 5 – she's done four shows there – triggered memories of the pair attending her performances: "When I walked into the foyer, I became very emotional. I was very upset because I had a flashback to those opening nights and seeing my parents upstairs and everybody celebrating. It was surreal."

And what's next? Possibly a trip back to England and potentially staging her own events with a band.

Interview over, it's time for Caroline to return backstage. Two of her old pre-show habits are gone – she used to bless herself with the sign of the cross and take an Olbas pastille, a herbal throat lozenge recommended for singers. Instead, for 9 to 5, she commences another nightly routine – running.

Bemused stagehands and fellow performers watch as she runs up and down amongst the theatrical clutter of a major production. "If I've got a big dance number to do, I need to get my heart rate up and warm up. It gets the adrenaline going and my heart pumping."

And with that, the star pupil of the Ransley School of Dance is off and running again.

9 to 5 The Musical, Capitol Theatre,
Haymarket, until May 8





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Theatre veteran Caroline O'Connor, above, stars as Roz in 9 to 5 The Musical, left; and, above right, on stage with 9 to 5 co-star Eddie Perfect at the Capitol Theatre. Pictures: David Hooley, Julian Andrews