

MY CRAZY WINDMILL FAMILY

As a new film opens about the nude revues of the Windmill Theatre, one writer tells how the venue became a second home to his nine relatives who worked there



By Christopher Silvester

The lights dim as the legendary tableau girls take to the stage. With exotic giant fans shielding their naked bodies, they begin to perform a series of intricate moves, each revealing an even more tantalising glimpse of flesh to an enraptured audience.

The star of the show, however, barely moves. Standing on a pedestal, the beautiful nude stares seductively at the crowd. When the performance ends, she steps into the wings to be greeted by a respectful stagehand, who averts his gaze as he passes her a dressing gown.

By today's standards, the daily shows at Soho's Windmill theatre seem impossibly chaste. But in Thirties London the Windmill was the only public theatre where nudity was permitted – albeit under a set of draconian rules. And soon it became one of the city's most popular locations.

Now, 75 years after it was founded by eccentric socialite Laura Henderson and showman Vivian Van Damm, the Windmill's heyday is the subject of a new film, Mrs Henderson Presents.

Soon after the war, my stepmother's eldest sister Una became a dancer at the Windmill – the theatre that proudly boasted it never closed during the Blitz – starting a family association that would last two decades, producing two marriages, four children and countless memories.

My stepmother's family would spend days and nights at the Windmill, as spectators, stagehands and showgirls. Mrs Henderson may have been the theatre's grande dame but, to the family, it was virtually a second home.

Michael and Jane O'Dea were Irish Catholics who arrived in Pimlico, London, in the Twenties. Michael worked as a verger while Jane raised their two boys and five girls. Their eldest child, Una, grew up to be a shapely redhead, and began dancing at the Windmill in 1947. Her younger sister Maureen, a former Tiller girl, joined the next year.

Una wasn't to stay long, as she won a part in a show at the London Hippodrome which went on tour to Australia, where she subsequently settled. But Maureen stayed at the Windmill for six years, becoming one of Van Damm's favourite girls. Van Damm, a former cinema manager who caused a scandal by showing a film about sexually transmitted diseases, was known as 'VD' – a nickname he revelled in.

Yet he ran the Windmill like a Swiss finishing school. He appointed 'head girls' to enforce discipline. Alcohol was banned, tardiness was a sackable offence and there were fines for swearing. Before he hired anyone, particularly nudes, he'd insist their parents came to the show. 'Van Damm

was a perfectionist. If things didn't go exactly right, you know it,' recalls my aunt Hilda, the third 'O'Dea dancer' to join the Windmill in 1953. She was 16.

A Windmill girl's most prized asset was, of course, her looks. But she also had to be able to sing and dance like a professional. 'There were wonderful fan dances,' says Hilda, 68, who now lives in Michigan. 'We did lovely ballet pieces with jungle, Scottish, South American and Western themes. There was always a cancan. There was a lot less flesh on display than you might see on an average beach today.'

Indeed, Windmill girls were both glamorous and respectable. As devout Catholics the O'Deas would not have approved of anything improper.

The girls' greatest challenge was their workload. 'We worked like dogs,'

Girls drank Guinness to boost their curves

recalls Hilda. 'We used to do a new run of shows every six weeks.' Under such circumstances, the girls had little difficulty maintaining their slim figures. Some were even encouraged to drink Guinness to emphasise their curves.

All the girls held ambitions beyond the Windmill. Many went on to have careers in straight theatre. Others would date, and sometimes marry, rich men they met at the theatre, something Van Damm was keen to encourage. With this in mind, he once sent Maureen and her friends for riding lessons, and even paid for them to

Matthew Bond's verdict on Mrs Henderson Presents, Cinema – Pages 66 and 67

have flying lessons. However, Van Damm was less forgiving of romance between his staff – as well as the nudes, there were male dancers, comedians and variety acts.

One was my uncle Barry, a singer who arrived at the Windmill in 1950. During the war, Barry had performed in RAF gang shows alongside some of Britain's future comedy legends.

'Tony Hancock was my sergeant, Peter Sellers dished out the costumes and played the drums, and Dick Emery was another member of our troupe,' Barry, 78, recalls today. 'I was recruited to the Windmill as a singing juvenile,' he says. 'I had to dance as well. Bruce Forsyth was another dancing juvenile. We were Windmill boys.'

At the theatre Barry met 20-year-old Maureen, which later resulted in the O'Deas' first 'Windmill wedding'.

Barry says the performers were generally too busy performing to think about sex with each other, though he certainly wasn't the only one to become involved with a dancer. 'There were one or two assignations in the showers, I believe,' he says.

Maureen wasn't short of admirers: Peter Sellers, Bill Kerr and Alfred Marks among them. But when Barry started dating Maureen, Van Damm was upset. 'I think that's why my contract wasn't renewed,' he says. 'He didn't think I was good enough for her.'

Soon Barry's friend Bruce Forsyth began dating a dancer too – Penny Calvert, who later became his first wife – and the four became close friends. 'We went on holiday to Jersey and used to go to Bruce's mum and dad's place after the dress rehearsals on a Sunday,' says Barry. 'He used to put on his home movies. He always put them on upside down at first.'

Other stars who passed through the Windmill included Harry Secombe, who performed a signature shaving sketch; Harry Worth with a ventrilo-

quist act; and Arthur English, who played a spiv. But these variety acts were mere warm-ups for the nude revues. And whenever any customers left the theatre, men would clamber over rows in a scramble for seats – it was called the 'Windmill Steeplechase'.

Although by keeping the nudes still Mrs Henderson had sidestepped the archaic laws on nudity, enforced by the Lord Chamberlain, it came at a price. 'The naked girl had to make sure she didn't move,' recalls Barry. 'Even the ones who danced around in skimpy costumes had to be careful they weren't too skimpy. But the Lord Chamberlain's Office would say when they were coming, so we knew in advance and extra pieces of gauze were draped over the female flesh.'

Barry and Maureen weren't the only couple in my family to meet at the

Windmill. Soon Hilda began dating Frank Maddens, an American airman who had previously been seeing another Windmill girl. They later married. Van Damm was delighted by this union. 'He made me a present of my wedding dress,' says Hilda.

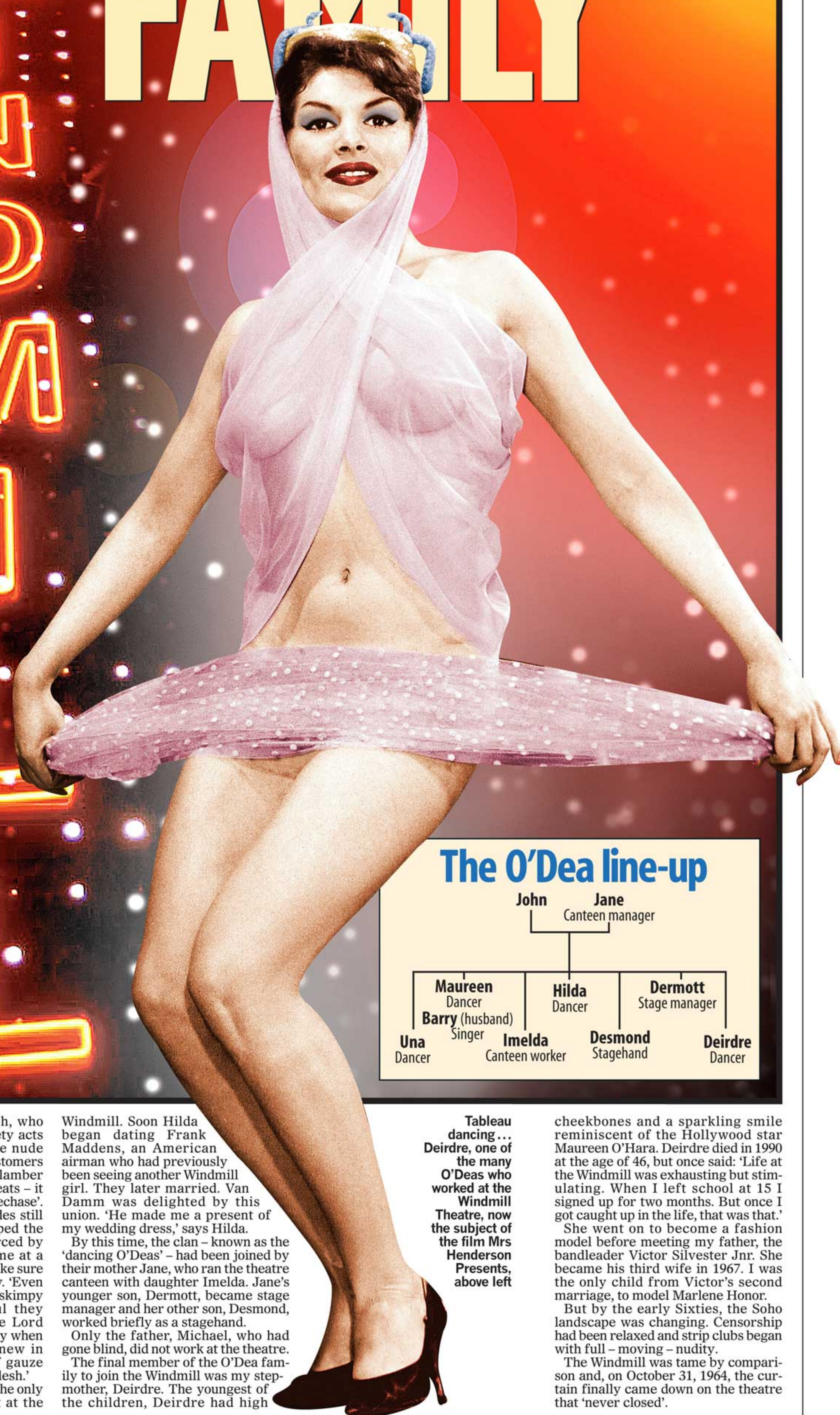
By this time, the clan – known as the 'dancing O'Deas' – had been joined by their mother Jane, who ran the theatre canteen with daughter Imelda. Jane's younger son, Dermott, became stage manager and her other son, Desmond, worked briefly as a stagehand.

Only the father, Michael, who had gone blind, did not work at the theatre.

The final member of the O'Dea family to join the Windmill was my stepmother, Deirdre. The youngest of the children, Deirdre had high



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The O'Dea line-up

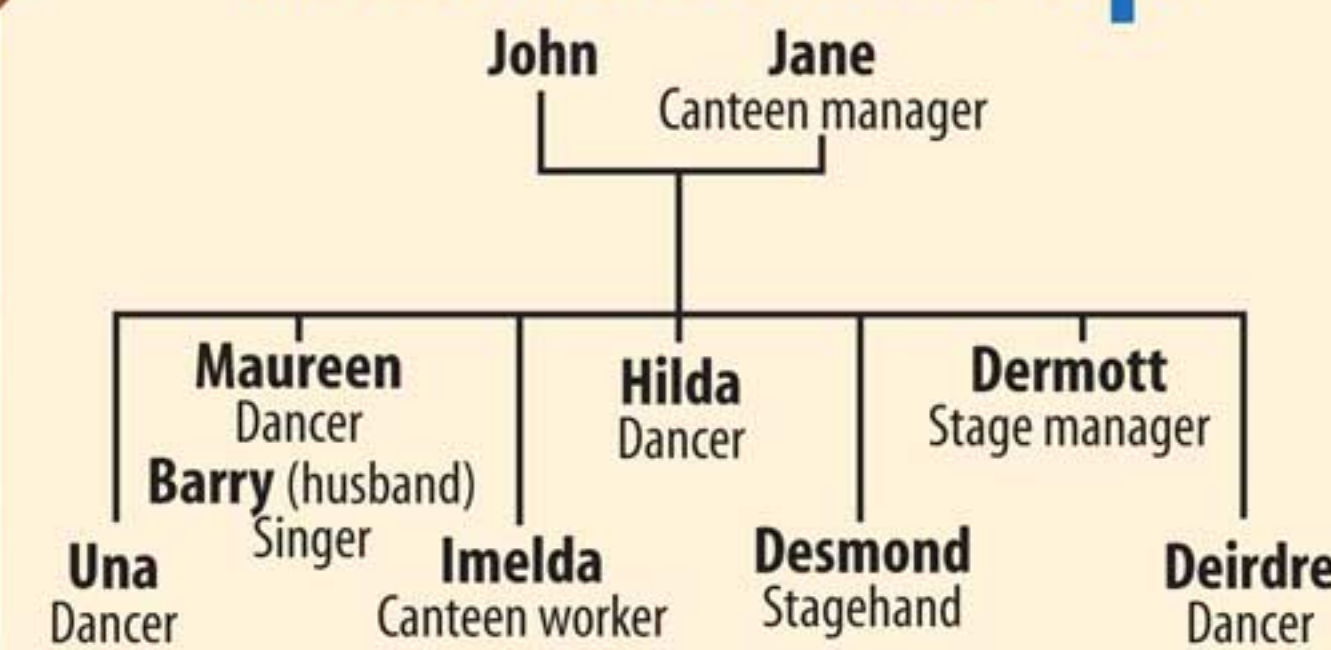


Tableau dancing... Deirdre, one of the many O'Deas who worked at the Windmill Theatre, now the subject of the film Mrs Henderson Presents, above left

cheekbones and a sparkling smile reminiscent of the Hollywood star Maureen O'Hara. Deirdre died in 1990 at the age of 46, but once said: 'Life at the Windmill was exhausting but stimulating. When I left school at 15 I signed up for two months. But once I got caught up in the life, that was that.'

She went on to become a fashion model before meeting my father, the bandleader Victor Silvester Jnr. She became his third wife in 1967. I was the only child from Victor's second marriage, to model Marlene Honor.

But by the early Sixties, the Soho landscape was changing. Censorship had been relaxed and strip clubs began with full – moving – nudity.

The Windmill was tame by comparison and, on October 31, 1964, the curtain finally came down on the theatre that 'never closed'.