

There'd no holding back our veterans of stage and screen

Many will remember Benita Collings as the smiling Playschool presenter, but now, nearing 80, she's back touring, writes ANGELA BENSTED.

The veteran actor has featured on Australian screens for almost as many years as we've had them.

With television credits including *Homicide*, *Cop Shop* and *Division 4*, Benita's longest gig was playing the straight guy to John Hamblin's Ham on *Playschool*, reading stories and singing songs beside Big Ted, Little Ted, Humpty and Jemima.

But touring is a new challenge for the 78-year-old who still hasn't conquered the art of packing.

"I had to buy a new suitcase because the old one was too old and heavy," she says as she prepares to leave Mackay for her next performance in Canberra.

"The new one is much lighter, but when I put the packed case on the scales it weighs exactly the same," she says with a sigh.

"You wouldn't believe I used to backpack."

The actor is touring Australia with *Senior Moments*, a sketch revue mocking ageism, which comes to southeast Queensland in May.

The tour is the second road trip for Benita and her fellow acting veterans - Max Gillies, John Woods, Russell Newman and Kim Lewis - none of whom



Benita Collings has a senior's moment with Geoff Harvey, Max Gillies and John Wood.

show signs of slowing down.

"Bits of the company have a few ails and ills but they keep on keeping on. That's what we do," the actor says, crediting her own stamina to healthy eating, gentle gym classes and regular walks.

Her favourite sketch from the show is called *Old School*, a playful poke at children's television.

Benita plays Miss Jane and Geoff Harvey (Middy) is Mr Music in a tongue-in-cheek mash-up of kindergarten classics.

"It's a real send-up of childhood shows that used to be around way back when. It's fun," she says.

While some of the show's gags might rely on longer memories for a giggle, Benita says her 18-year-old granddaughter found plenty to laugh at.

"She said she kept turning to her mother and saying, 'that's you', so she was getting the point from that generation," Benita says.

A war baby with a "regular upbringing" in Sydney, Benita says she knew from a young age she wanted a life on stage.

Even so, she took her mother's advice to learn typing and shorthand first, skills that saw her through her early years in the industry.

Once acting jobs started flowing she abandoned secretarial work, but Benita doesn't regret her time behind the desk.

"When computers arrived, I was the smartie pants who could say 'guess who can touch type?'" she says with her familiar laugh.

The longest-serving presenter, Benita fronted *Playschool's* cameras for the last time in 1999, 30 years after she'd started and just months before being unceremoniously let go.

"I can't remember the exact words they used," she says.

"They were just getting rid of some presenters. Nobody was told why. It wasn't an age thing because some of the people they got in were our age."

With casting calls from other studios also petering out, Benita did what many people in their 50s do; she changed tack and sought new challenges.

"I didn't want to wait on tables or work in a call centre," she says.

Instead, she retrained to teach presentation skills, starting her own company along the way.

Since then she's been picked up by the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA)'s corporate performance program and later NIDA Open, where she runs short courses in television presenting.

It's a busy dance card, but despite the demand for her teaching skills it's clear Benita Collings is unlikely to pass up a chance to be on stage herself.

"I enjoy doing it," she says.

"I won't do anything if the word 'fun' isn't in there somewhere."

Events Centre Caloundra. Friday May 24, 1pm and 7.30pm; Saturday May 25, 2pm and 7.30pm. Tickets \$55-\$69. Bookings 5491 4240 or theeventscentre.com.au



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