

Talking to John Clarke: a friend and biographer reflects

Written by Anne Pender, Professor and ARC Future Fellow, University of New England



John Clarke: he particularly hated management speak. AAP

On the Thursday before that terrible Sunday when John collapsed during a hike in the Grampians, he sent me an email, alerting me to a typo in a biographical essay I had published about him. I was so grateful to him for taking the trouble to check the text and for pointing out the error, and said so. “Sorry to be a pedant”, he replied. They were his last words to me.

We had been having a leisurely conversation about our doings: he telling me how much he was enjoying working with Shaun Micallef, and looking forward to “a little lie down” at Easter. In fact I have been talking to John about his life for about eight years now, on and off: in person, on the phone, by email and sometimes snail mail correspondence.

On many occasions our conversations lasted for hours, with him telling me extraordinary stories about touring the clubs of New Zealand as Fred Dagg with a couple of singers, or about how his friend Ginette Mc Donald talked him in to auditioning for a film role in London with Barry Humphries, Bruce Beresford, Barry Crocker and Nick Garland. He played one of Bazza’s drinking partners.

Once, only recently, he told me about his first radio interview with Robyn Williams in Australia. It took place in 1977 at the ANZAAS conference, in the toilets, so that they could escape the jabbering scientists. John pretended to be a philosopher and addressed the topic The Meaning of Life.

When I spoke to John on the phone I would often laugh so much that my colleagues would rush along the corridor from their offices to see what was going on in mine.

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