



## DRAMA QUEENS

LORETO NORMANHURST SCHOOL FOR GIRLS ON SYDNEY'S NORTH SHORE IS A BREEDING GROUND FOR BUDDING ACTORS.

By *Meryl Huxford*

Imagine studying the characteristics of an elderly man, his speech, his gait, his outlook, his interaction with peers, and then portraying that character on stage. It sounds frightening for any adult to contemplate but for Loreto Normanhurst's all-female troupe, it's simply a walk in the park. The 2015 HSC

drama cohort of 18 students produced outstanding results under the leadership of departmental head, Chris Woods. With the intensity of core Higher School Certificate (HSC) subjects such as maths and English requiring hours of independent study, the opportunity to include drama in an otherwise conventional portfolio of choice has huge appeal for many students. As a senior drama pupil at the school described her experience: "We play, we experiment, we fail in a safe way and therefore we learn; drama builds confidence, teaches us to collaborate, communicate and think critically."

With a roll of 1000 students, including more than 200 boarders, Loreto Normanhurst is an independent, Catholic, day and boarding school for girls in years five to 12, and is part of an international network of Loreto schools, seven of which are based in Australia. The founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto sisters), Mary Ward, was a devout Englishwoman who lived from 1585-1645 and believed that "women in time will come to do much". She was progressive and liberal-minded and forged an active ministry to facilitate educational opportunities for girls, rivaling pathways available to boys of that time. At the foundation of the Loreto learning

platform is FACE — faith, academic, community and extra-curricular participation, rounding off a holistic approach to education. Established in 1897, Mary Ward's values extend far and wide at Loreto Normanhurst. Set on 25 acres of lush land 30 kilometres from the CBD, the school is a city option with a distinctly rural flavour.

Student Georgia McGinness, who doubled as school captain in 2015, gained a clear vision for a future in theatre as a result of her drama experience at Loreto. Georgia, who is from the NSW regional city of Dubbo, brought her own spice to the Loreto mix as a boarder. With a wealth of dance experience but no formal training in drama, she's unclear where her dramatic gene comes from. "My parents think I'm adopted," she says. "The drama department's dedication to the art is absolutely incredible, and I wouldn't have engaged with the subject so much if I hadn't had such great teachers." Department head Chris Woods believes drama enhances skills required of 21st-century learners. She admits that in a rapidly changing world, a teacher's role is to provide students with the capacity to go forth, contribute creatively and respond to the big challenges that society faces. "Drama students are courageous," she says. "They willingly face new challenges every day with joy, passion and



"Drama students are courageous. They willingly face new challenges every day with joy, passion and commitment."



commitment. What more do you need for life? The drama cohort of 2015 celebrated each other's gifts and acted with felicity and sincerity in the Loreto tradition."

A shining example of this was Georgia's prestigious selection to OnSTAGE for her HSC drama individual Project (IP) and also her Group Performance (GP). The NSW Board of Studies selected both her exemplary HSC pieces for showcasing at Sydney's Seymour Centre in February this year. Georgia says deciding on her HSC pieces required thorough research and investigation. "For my IP, I shrank the cast of the Broadway play, 39 steps, from 140 to 10 characters in what could most easily be explained as a one-woman show," she explains. "I found it fun to explore different characters conversing with one another."

The GP in which Georgia performed focused on the media-hot topic of legislating euthanasia in Australia's ageing population. Each group writes, directs and performs its own unique work. Georgia's delight in analysing jokes would undoubtedly be integral to the script. She played aged care resident Harvey, while her two friends played the similarly elderly Irene and Muriel. In a complex plot starring homophone confusion with degenerating neurones taking a major role, the three Friends battle the universe. "As the only subject that has group work in the entire HSC course, I found it incredibly valuable learning to cope with moments of tension, frustration and disagreement," Georgia recalls. "Ms Woods' insistence that research is the face of any creative piece meant: we spent a lot of time finding out

about conditions within retirement homes in Australia, as well as discussing euthanasia."

This year Georgia is moving to Sydney to follow her passion and will concentrate on building a substantial portfolio of theatre roles before applying for drama schools. "It has turned out that a fun hobby that I was introduced to by Loreto has become something I love," she says. "Drama gets you up on your feet and forces you to engage in your learning. The adrenaline builds when you know the audience is being entertained and that engagement is what makes it special." ❦



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** Georgia in her school uniform; an aerial view of Loreto Normanhurst's expansive campus; the school is situated on Sydney's North Shore.