

CONFIDENTIAL

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



PHIL BROWN

First Casualty is a triumph

MY BAROMETER for measuring a good production is how often I look at Queensland Theatre's recent play, *First Casualty*. I didn't even glance at it until the end of the show. It was a good sign and it was a terrific show, a multimedia triumph with fine acting and a completely authentic script by a serving soldier, Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Johnston (pictured).

It's a powerful and at times confronting story about our soldiers serving on a small outpost in Afghanistan in the war that ended so sadly for the Afghan people, with the Taliban now



firmly in control, if you could call it that. Johnston risks all in the telling of this tale which is surprisingly funny at times, with gallows humour pervading the dialogue. There's even, believe it or not, a musical interlude, which is hilarious and shouldn't work, but it does. Johnston is a musician after all – an officer who is a bit of a Renaissance man.

Sadly I missed opening night because I was in Paris (sorry to mention that again) but I managed to finally see it on closing night. Johnston was there to see his baby finally put to bed but we certainly think this incredible work has legs and it should return. It would be a great festival piece for a brave festival.

Queensland Theatre artistic director Lee Lewis, who directed this piece deserves credit for championing it and bringing it to the stage. Soldiers in a theatre of war seems appropriate for a drama and this is an amazing one.

Meanwhile, the playwright is off to become our army attaché in Japan soon. We wish him well as we wave goodbye.

Author Vicki Bennett at her Chelmer home. Picture: Richard Walker



THE PAST CATCHES UP WITH AUTHOR

SOME might say Brisbane writer Vicki Bennett is living in the past and they'd be right. To a degree.

Bennett, a corporate trainer and author of 34 books, many of them about empowering people to succeed, turned her hand in recent years to fiction with picture books for children and a young adult novel.

Her adventure into that world began with *Two Pennies*, a heartwarming story inspired by her grandfather's service in France in World War I.

That book has become something of a touchstone, been translated into French and Bennett is a regular visitor to the places where Aussies fought in

the Great War, particularly to the little town of Villers-Bretonneux in Northern France, where *Two Pennies* is set.

Bennett was there recently.

"I'm a bit of a rock star in Villers-Bretonneux," she laughs. "I toured around the Somme in September and October and read from my book in French."

The French people revere the memory of our Diggers going to help them and it's a subject Bennett can't leave alone.

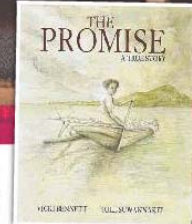
"I'm now writing a novel centred around Villers-Bretonneux," she says. "It's about a woman in Brisbane who finds letters that suggest her grandfather had another family in France. There was some gossip about that in our family."

Whether it was true is beside the point. The fact is it could have been true and it's the basis for her novel, which will include – spoiler alert – time travel.

Bennett has also written and co-produced a film *Never Forget Australia*, the story of a little part of Australia that lies in the middle of France.

After all, Villers-Bretonneux has the largest Australian War Memorial in Europe and Anzac Day is a public holiday there.

Bennett has also explored World War II in her work and her new children's book *The Promise* pays tribute to the assistance given to Australian servicemen by the people of Papua New Guinea. Her father served there and *The Promise* is about



a wounded Australian airman hidden in a cave by a local woman deep in the jungle near Milne Bay where Bennett's dad was involved in a major battle against the Japanese.

Both World Wars serve as inspiration as does her family. Her popular young adult novel *Oliver's First Big Spy Adventure* was inspired by her imaginative grandson Oliver, who announced to her one day that he had an inner life as a spy. As you do.

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