



IN MY BACKYARD

She's the diminutive actor known the world over for her magic portrayal of Professor Sprout in the Harry Potter film series as well as for her countless other award-winning stage and screen roles over a 50-year career. Now the legendary Miriam Margolyes wants you to come and stay at her Southern Highlands home.

IMAGES TONY SHEFFIELD

Miriam Margolyes is an acting dynamo who travels the world performing in films and television series. But if there's one thing Margolyes will tell you she is most definitely not, it's glamorous.

My life does sound very lovely and glamorous, doesn't it? Which I don't understand at all, really, because I am the least glamorous person you could meet, she says, chortling raucously at the very idea. This is because I never make up, I never change my clothes, except for cleanliness of course, and I really don't like appearing on those celebrity programs either because there is so much trivial chat going on you can spend the entire time talking bollocks and that's just silly.

One thing that's decidedly not silly is her eye for property. Over the years Margolyes, who is now 77, has collated an impressive portfolio that includes a terrace house in Bondi, two townhouses in London, an Umbrian farmhouse in Italy, an English seaside house within sight of the British Channel and Yarrawa Hill near Robertson, her tree house home in the Southern Highlands.

Margolyes and partner Professor Heather Sutherland, an academic who specialised in Indonesian trade, first set eyes on Yarrawa Hill in 1996. Down a dirt road, their 156 acres of secluded rainforest land butts onto the escarpment side of the Budderoo National Park.

We bought the land following my role in Babe, where I was the voice of Fly, Babe's sheepdog mother, explains

Margolyes. A lot of Babe was filmed next door on John and Vicki Mauger's gorgeous property, and when we discovered this place, I thought, I want this. Heather and I, and Heather's sister Sandra, who is a private detective in San Francisco, bought the land and then we built the road and the house.

The home sits high up in the tree canopy with sweeping views of Wollongong and the Pacific Ocean. Designed by architect Mark Jones, it is clad in steel with broad triangular decks on thick poles facing north.

We found Mark by looking through magazines and we really liked the style of house he designs. Then we met him and he gave us each a questionnaire to fill in that asked: How do you think I can build you a house if I don't know you and how you like to live?

The result is a big, welcoming home, resplendent with character and warmth. Three large independent apartment spaces are linked to a communal living area that maximises the views. Each apartment has its own bedroom with double bed, study and luxurious ensuite, and is linked by a gallery cum library to the Great Living

Room, with its kitchen, walk-in pantry, wood-burning stove, open fireplace and combined living/dining area. Floors are blackbutt wood, and much of the furniture and the doors are imported from Indonesia.

The house sleeps six but can comfortably accommodate an extra three thanks to daybeds in the studies. Outside, wildlife is always close.

We get visits by kangaroos, wombats, wallabies, lyrebirds and even the occasional snake, though thankfully I haven't met one on this stay.

In 2013 Margolyes became an Australian citizen and remains as in demand today in acting circles as ever. Now at home in London, she recently filmed another series of *The Real Marigold on Tour*, which follows Margolyes and other senior citizens around the world. She has also done commentaries for *Flipping Profit*, a real-life BBC infotainment about car boot sales, and for bestselling kids' book series *Winnie and Wilbur*. We will see her on Australian screens in the new season of *Rake* later this year, and she is also set to star alongside *Essie Davis* in the film version of *Miss Fisher's Murder Mysteries*. She returns to Australia in December to begin rehearsals for the Melbourne Theatre Company's production of *The Lady in the Van*, and while she's away she has decided to rent out Yarrawa Hill on Airbnb.

I've always thought houses work best if they are used, she says. And now that we have decided to make Yarrawa Hill available for more people to enjoy, I'm happy because it will be even more loved.

yarrawahill.com ■