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# The New Zealand Herald

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## Nana's wartime tales

By Dionne Christian

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Gloria Stanford's granddaughter, Amy Waller, performs a solo show of some of her Nana's colourful memories in the play Gloria. Photo / Brett Phibbs

## Runaway bride inspires granddaughters to pen and produce a chapter of her World War II stories

Sitting in her Avondale home, Gloria Stanford is surrounded by mementos of a long and happy life: numerous photographs of her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren; the 200-plus key-ring collection from her husband, Stan; and books including those in which her own writing was published; vintage textiles and favourite trinkets.

But if the 89-year-old's life has been - by and large - a happy one, it's also been eventful; just take her adventures during World War II. It's a war story her seven children, 12 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren have been raised listening to and marvelling at. "We're a very talkie family," she says.

Granddaughters Amy and Catherine Waller were so fascinated they wrote a play about Nana Gloria, who made international headlines as "The bride who wouldn't leave New Zealand". Now, almost seven decades after her colourful escapades, Gloria opens at Tapac.

The solo show is performed by Amy, who says it deals with love and loss through the eyes of young New Zealand women who married American servicemen and were meant to follow them to new homes in the United States.

"As a child, I was fascinated and inspired by Nana's bravery," says Amy. "She was a woman ahead of her time who made a bold and independent decision and I have mused over for some time what it would have been like to make such a risky decision."

In 1946, Gloria and her then 18-month-old son, Boyne, were to sail on the liner Lurline, which was carrying New Zealand wives and children to be reunited with the American men they had married during World War II. Gloria's husband, Charles Schwartz, had returned home to Cincinnati, Ohio, and had never met their young son; in fact, the couple hadn't seen one another for nearly two years following a whirlwind courtship during which she fell pregnant.



The Lurline sailing was delayed and Gloria, who had served in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps, couldn't stop thinking about her parents and sister and all she enjoyed about life in New Zealand. Homesick before the Lurline left the dock, she scooped up Boyne and their luggage and begged to disembark. The ship sailed without them and Gloria cabled Charles to let him know she was not on board.

She says there was a finality about leaving New Zealand. In the 1940s, communications were slow and leaving New Zealand for the United States or Europe meant one simply did not know when or if one would see family and friends again. Gloria's dramatic departure from the Lurline was reported in local newspapers; she told reporters that she had started to discover how lovely New Zealand was and doubted Charles would miss her as much as her family and friends would.

However, she travelled to the US a few months later once her parents and sister gained residency, but never felt settled in Cincinnati. So, in the 1960s, the family, which now numbered six children, returned to New Zealand but this time it was Charles who found it too difficult to make a new home on the other side of the world. The marriage ended and Gloria later married Stan Stanford, who she spent the next 50 years with and with whom she had a seventh child.

Gloria deals specifically with the World War II chapter of her life and the first few months in the United States. It talks about the friendship she struck up with former child star Jackie Cooper, who was in Auckland entertaining American troops. He and his band performed at her 21st birthday party in Mt Eden and she recalls one date was to a movie screening at the lavish St Heliers home of the Moodabe family, which developed and operated as New Zealand's first cinemas.

"We were very much living for the day because we never knew who was going to live or die," she says. "When Charles left New Zealand, I had no idea whether we would see each other again and it just seemed like a long and lonely time with me and my child on our own." Amy says these feelings of isolation and loneliness influenced her decision to make the play a solo one, but she never wanted it to be a linear re-telling of her Nana's lively memories.

"Certain parts reflect the way I pictured things when I was a child and hearing things like how Nana 'jumped off' the ship, so that scene is quite heightened and very noir. There are elements of magical realism as well as physical theatre. Because music and dancing were so much a part of life, there's swing music which reflects the period."

Gloria's adventures continued long after World War II. She and Stan were active in the anti-nuclear and anti-apartheid movements and she travelled to Russia to lecture on and research women's rights. Amy says the greatest challenge was deciding what to put into the play. "I narrowed it down to a chapter in Nana's life which highlights the points I wanted to make. I was drawn to the idea of making choices and what happens when you want to go in a certain direction, especially as a young woman."

Gloria, who saw the play when Amy performed it for a short development season in Orewa, says she loves it.

Telling the story of her grandmother's colourful World War II years has prompted Amy to want to write more plays about New Zealand women. Her theatre company, The Vintage Collective, has launched a fundraiser on crowd funding website pledgema.

## On stage

What: Gloria

Where and when: Tapac, Western Springs, November 23-30

By Dionne Christian

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