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“My granny used to take us up into the gods at the Old Vic where I developed a taste for drama – and my mother’s sister, my Auntie Joan, was also an inspiration as she was a ballerina and danced, under the name Joan Kent, with the Markova/Dolin Company.

“The other great influence on my life has been art. *The Story of Art* by E.H. Gombrich is a book that always reminds me of my formative years. So that would be nice to find washed up on the beach of my desert island.”

It was one of those strange chance occurrences that change lives that brought Jenny to Oxford in 1962.

She wanted to study at Leeds University, following a course that combined English Literature and Art, under Quentin Bell, the art historian and author.

Jenny was offered a place at Leeds conditional on getting an ‘A’ grade in A-Level Art. She finished the exam early, but, instead of leaving the exam room, she was tempted to make ‘improvements’ and accidentally spilt some water, ruining her painting – and her chance of a place at Leeds.

Her second choice was the Ruskin School of Fine Art and Drawing in Oxford, which is where she came to study.

Jenny said: “That was a turning point in my life and there is a painting in the Ashmolean Museum that I admire intensely and which reminds me of that time. It is Uccello’s *Hunt by Night*. That is a real possibility for the island.”

On her first day at the Ruskin, on the steps of the Ashmolean Museum, Jenny bumped into the singer-songwriter Vashti Bunyan (now hailed as the ‘mother of Freak Folk’) and they became friends. Vashti learned to play on Jenny’s old guitar.

Later, with Angela Strange, the three Ruskin students founded a group called The Three of Us.

Jenny recalled: “Vashti and I shared a flat at 219 Iffley Road. Sitting on the floor with our hamster, Heap, we wrote a song called ‘17 Pink Sugar Elephants’, which Vashti later developed into the haunting ‘Train Song’.

“It reappeared recently as the soundtrack to an award-winning Reebok commercial which was shown on a 30ft plasma screen at Wembley during an American Football game.

“This month our song will be heard again – this time in a Samsung TV and cinema advert,” Jenny added.

“Vashti met and worked with many other musicians and is famous for setting off in a horse-drawn caravan looking for a commune on the Isle of Uist in the Outer Hebrides, supposedly set up by the singer Donovan.”

In those heady student days doing gigs and singing at Oxford balls with Vashti and Angela, Jenny was lucky enough to count Michael Palin (Brasenose College) and Terry Jones (St Edmund Hall) among her close friends.

Jenny said: “Terry had digs in Wellington Square and he and Michael acted with the Experimental Theatre Company and performed mock tea ceremonies – it was all very Pythonesque long before the Pythons.”

The Three of Us also sang with the Oxford band The Four Beats.

Jenny said: “The Four Beats introduced me to their agent, Mervyn Conn, and thanks to him, a music publisher in London’s Denmark Street, published about ten of my songs, three



of which were released by Columbia Records and Verve Folkways in the US.

“‘Bring it to Me’ ‘You Know’ and ‘I’ve Heard it All Before’ have recently been re-released on *Dreambables* a compilation albums on the Cherry Red label. Angela and I were on *Ready Steady Go* with the New Seekers, Big D Irwin and The Honeycombs.”

After all this, Jenny got herself a ‘proper job’ at S H Benson, a London advertising agency – at a time when London was buzzing with creativity and TV commercials were being directed by people like Ridley Scott and Alan Parker.

Jenny said: “I started out as an art director but moved into copywriting, developing concepts and writing press ads and TV and cinema commercials. A lot of my friends worked on *Yellow Submarine*, the animated film based on Beatles music. It was an exciting time to be living and working in London. In 1970, I married a lawyer who worked in the north east. We first lived in Hampstead, just off Keats Grove, then set up home in Yorkshire.”

While living in the wilds of Yorkshire, Jenny, now a mother to two sons, Tom and Edward, wrote children’s books under her married name Jenny Hawkesworth. They include *The Lonely Skyscraper*, illustrated by Emmanuel Schogut.

In 1987, Jenny collaborated with illustrator Colin McNaughton, and Mark Bramble, the

producer of *Barnum* and *42nd Street*, on a musical version of Colin’s book *Fat Pig* which, with the title *Fat Pig – the Musical* was performed at the Leicester Haymarket Theatre.

The following year, Jenny’s play *Me and My Dinosaur* (for which she also wrote the music) was performed at the Polka Children’s Theatre in London.

Divorced in 1989, Jenny returned to Oxford where, initially, she worked as a copywriter. But after the publication of *When I Became an Amazon*, she threw her energies into poetry. Then an old friend called.

“Terry Jones invited me to a party in London. We stayed up talking until 3am. I told him I had always wanted to do a degree in English. Terry encouraged me to go for it and introduced me to English Fellow, Lucy Newlyn at his old college,” Jenny remembered.

“I had just finished the two-year English Literature and Language Certificate at the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education and was thrilled to be offered a place at Teddy Hall to study for the remaining two years of my degree.

“As a result I sold my house in Lonsdale Road, giving myself the means to walk into my present life and the ability to teach poetry at Oxford University on the Undergraduate Diploma and the Master of Studies in Creative Writing.

One possible choice for the desert island,

therefore, would be the books *Lucy and I* edited (*Synergies: Creative Writing in Academic Practice*, volumes one and two) which came out of a two year programme we ran together for undergraduates and graduates, funded by the Institute for the Advancement of University Learning.”

In 1996, Jenny was given an Arts Council grant to work with Yasmin Sidhwa from Pegasus Theatre. Yasmin dramatised *Amazon* and it was performed in Oxford and London with Pegasus’ artistic director Euton Daley and composer Juliet Russell’s choir, Chandalay Quor. Then, as Writer in Residence for the Oxfordshire Community Arts Theatre Group, Coral Arts, Jenny worked on a promenade performance called *The Gifts of the Angels*.

Involving 400 people, a huge carnival of puppets, music and multi-media, it was performed to great acclaim at Dorchester Abbey, in 1997.

On her second stint for Coral Arts, she worked with a mixed group of adults and children, with the Butoh Dance Group, Café Raison and classical ghazal singer, Jayanta Bose (whose amazing voice can be heard on Nitin Sawhney albums) on *The Forest that Sailed Away*

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– about the deforestation of Oxfordshire in Tudor times to build ships to fight the Spanish Armada. It was performed at Minster Lovell Hall in 2000.

After completing her degree in 2000, Jenny had a stint in 2007 as a civil servant working in the Strategic Communications Unit at Number 10, preparing briefings for then prime minister Tony Blair, before spending some time at the Equality and Human Rights Commission until March 2008.

With so many strands to her career and such traumatic life experiences, I wondered what Jenny would want to have with her on the island?

“It is difficult because, at the moment, I am caught up with the fantastic young cast performing *After Gilgamesh*, so the book of the script, published by Mulfran Press, which has rehearsal photographs in it, would be a possibility; then I will never forget my first sight of *The Hunt by Night*, it is such a wonderful painting. The *Synergies* books would remind me of an intensely rewarding time of my life, reading English at Oxford and afterwards, with Lucy’s help and encouragement, sharing my love of poetry and creative writing with a new generation.

“But I could not be without the book that started it all off and has inspired me for so long, so I will take the poetry of Wilfred Owen to my desert island.”

■ Jenny Lewis will be talking about her next anthology *Taking Mesopotamia* on July 7 at 7.30pm in the Kings Arms, Holywell Street, Oxford



*Jenny Lewis's father, Thomas Charles Lewis, in the uniform of the South Wales Borderers*