



**“PHILOSOPHICALLY, THE CONCEPT OF CURTAIN CALL HAS MUCH IN COMMON WITH THE FRENCH WRITER CAMUS’ VIEW THAT MEANING DERIVES FROM SOLIDARITY WITH OTHERS. WE MUST HAVE THE COURAGE TO CONFRONT THAT OUR LIVES ARE FINITE.”**

## The final countdown

**Dave Smith** chats to Clare Keenan, founder of **Curtain Call**, the company that offers standing ovations for clients (unavoidably) lying down. Photos by Chris Coad

When the late US comedian Bob Hope’s wife asked him what sort of funeral he wanted, his laconic reply was “surprise me”. Not everybody is as willing to wing it on the day. In fact, we are seeing quite an upsurge in the number of people who plan both their funeral and subsequent memorial with supreme care. Invention and downright eccentricity are certainly playing a part. The “burial of my ashes in space” routines initiated by the likes of *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry readily spring to mind.

Inevitably, the whole business of making the despatch part of life surpass the hatch and the match parts is being recognised, increasingly, as big

business. In Wellington, there is Curtain Call, a niche service dedicated to the double-barrelled proposition that, whether funeral or memorial, detailed planning is everything and the person to please is the deceased. (S)he is, after all, footing the bill for all this. (Unsurprisingly it is also essential to get alongside the surviving loved ones to make sure that the big day goes off well and there are no embarrassing standoffs or mix-ups).

Curtain Call rests in the youthful and meticulous hands of Clare Keenan, from South Africa, but whose basic heritage is eye and ear-catchingly Irish. Her thumbnail CV includes early years in a copper mining town in Southern Africa, a BA in Philosophy/Classical Civilisation, study at the Sorbonne, Master of Public Policy from Victoria University, emergency evacuation co-ordinator (in Sydney and Paris), restaurant, film and festival management, and an award from the Canadian Government for promoting survivors’ rights in South Africa.

“The philosophy behind Curtain Call was truly highlighted after the events of 9/11 when there were many cruelly sudden deaths; yet few, if any, bodies to bury,” Clare gently observes. “People and their families needed that special final social event that makes our finite lives special in the way that religious ritual used to in its own way. In what is becoming an increasingly secular society we ensure that our members can still be the life and soul of the party after they are gone.” Clare has seen way too many funerals that just weren’t worthy of the person she knew. “They would have been appalled, like I was.”

So I ask who these “members” are? The answer is both firm and spontaneous: “We work with outstanding people whose lives are worthy of a standing ovation.” Having been at some awful church funerals lately where serial amateur stand-up comics had to be yanked off the altar with umbrella handles I can empathise with that.

“Most of our members have come to us by word of mouth. I have clients all around the world from New York to Hong Kong. They pay a substantial upfront fee for a full advisory and counselling service. Together, we devise a basic memorial strategy then we review that plan each year on payment of a smaller fee, and it becomes part of their will. So far, I’ve not lost a member to the Grim Reaper, everyone is at the ‘ideas stage’ still.

“We have started up a very worthwhile collection of people who get together fairly regularly. For example, we have an annual event we call the ‘Sandra West Memorial Party’. This is in honour of the Texan heiress who, in the 1970s, insisted on being buried in her blue Ferrari, and wearing a negligée with her seat reclined at a comfortable angle.”

So the material nature of our limited existence doesn’t necessarily play second fiddle to the spiritual dimension? “Philosophically, the concept of Curtain Call has much in common with the French writer Camus’ view that meaning derives from solidarity with others. We must have the courage to confront that our lives are finite.” Indeed.

But if we don’t own a Ferrari or can’t afford the big space shot what other things can we consider? Apparently, the options are endless. “Some small part of you can always be shot out of a cannon – with or without fireworks and Tchaikovsky’s 1812.” Clare works with an in-house researcher and events organiser as part of a worldwide network that can suggest ever new and enthralling ways of going out in style.

Curtain Call can help with organising biographical films of member’s lives, portrait painting, safety deposit boxes for storing key items or even devising special memorial jewellery.

And how about this one? “In Scandinavia they have just devised a method of freezing the body by pouring liquid nitrogen over it whereupon a machine, like the ones that mix paint down at Dulux, vigorously shakes the full coffin and the corpse literally turns to dust.” Neat, eh?

The less imaginative of Clare’s members might focus on burial at sea or in the air (not easy though), innovative or dirt cheap coffins or just making sure that the mourners really do get the ritzy party they deserve. “One lucky bunch are going to get three days at Huka Lodge,” beams Clare. We must, I suggest, hope that the bill is paid for well in advance and that there are no



unfortunate misunderstandings. And there’s the rub. The families, without help, can turn into the fly in the ointment or a pain in the hearse.

“One of the most important aspects of Curtain Call is that we work with both the member and their families to make sure that our members’ best laid schemes don’t founder just because what they wanted is not acceptable to the survivors.”

So there will be no hopping down to the IRD to throw ashes into the local tax inspector’s eyes? “We can assist only with what is legal and inoffensive,” is the comparatively sober answer. “Seriously though, we do see in newspapers that so many valuable organ donations are being overruled by the families. Often this is simply because they were not prepared for that.”

Curtain Call also has a strong social conscience. “We are not just in the business of indulging frivolous whims, although we and our members do have a serious sense of fun. However, we also try to suggest ways in which a person’s life can be best honoured long term. Sometimes that means we cater to the philanthropic wishes of our members and match them carefully to causes that reflect their passions and interest through the Robin Hood Foundation.”

I suggest that maybe her members might be at the control freak end of the personality spectrum.

“Just a little. They are like the people who make a will with a lawyer then constantly review the legal bits, but here they are forever on the look out for stunning nuts-and-bolts ideas for their ultimate send-offs,” she opines while spreading out before me a set of brochures. These depict minimal eco design and plywood coffins. Some look like bathtubs, others like over-large window-seats.

But what if somebody here really does want to send their ashes into space? Clare has an agency set up with Celestis, the Houston-based foundation that can offer you one of four outer space services: Earth Rise, Earth Orbit, Luna and Voyager. Fees range from US\$695 to US\$12,500. For that you get up to 14 grams of you hurled into whatever part of space you’ve paid for. Others commit their bodies to the earth. Clare can help you to do the opposite.

So if you ever attend a cremation where the casket goes backwards through the closing red curtains then reappears as applause is heard over the PA system before going backwards and forwards through the curtains in one rapturous coffin call after another; just assume that Clare Keenan and her team may have had something to do with it.

[www.curtaincall.co.nz](http://www.curtaincall.co.nz)

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