

When loving a son is a crime

- the George Betsis story

MARY Coustas, writer, actress and comedienne, has penned some of Australia's funniest lines but nothing had been more important, or more sober, than a letter she wrote this week.

She was up most of Thursday night at the Bondi home she shares with husband George Betsis, getting it just right. It contained an important message, a message for Tomas. When the advertising executive and the entertainer married in their own big, fat Greek wedding in January 2005, Coustas got a stepson, Tomas, as well as a husband.

Betsis describes the relationship that Coustas and Tomas share as "very special". Tomas calls Coustas "Marebear" and she calls him her family, conscious not to usurp the role of his mother, Priscilla Dunstan.

"Tom has one mother and that's Priscilla . . . I see him as my family and that's what we are," Coustas says.

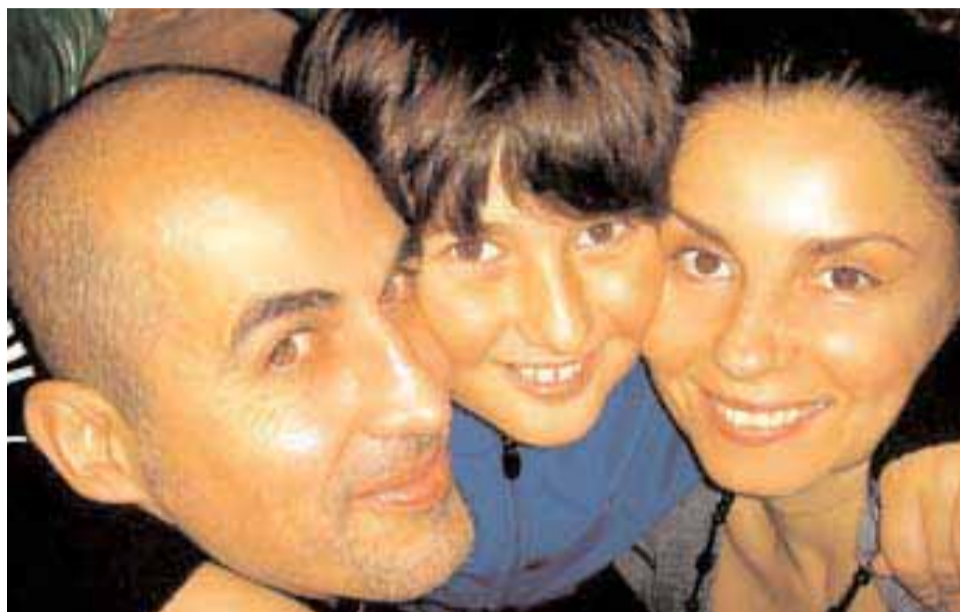
With a 15-year age difference between them, Dunstan, now 35, met Betsis, 49, 12 years ago when she was a student in an advertising class. Dunstan was a mezzo-soprano and an accomplished violinist. As she told it to US chat show supremo Oprah, she was born with the rare gift of a perfect memory for sounds. From the age of four or five, her mother could play a Mozart concerto once on the piano and little Priscilla was able to replay it on her violin note for note. At school she could remember everything the teacher said without having to take notes.

When Tomas was born in June, 1998, she realised that her gift of hearing a "second language" allowed her to interpret his gurgles and cries. "Because of my gift for sound, I was able to pick out certain patterns in his cries and then remember what those patterns were later on when he cried again," Dunstan has said. "I realised that other babies were saying the same words."

It was the secret language of babies. With her talent and Betsis's advertising know-how, they turned it into a business and a lucrative one at that - Dunstan Baby Language. It is all up there on YouTube: the home videos shot by Betsis and the story touchingly narrated by a very articulate Tomas. DVDs for sale.

Betsis and Dunstan never married and by 2002 their relationship was over. He had already met fellow Greek-Australian Mary Coustas, but it was not until late 2003 that they started dating.

Coustas had her own rare gift - for making people laugh. The actress, whose alter ego was the over-the-top Greek-Australian character Effie, had already carried off a Logie.



Tug of love ... George Betsis with son Tomas and wife Mary Coustas.

She had moved to Sydney from her native Melbourne in 2003 after her starring vehicle for Channel 7, *Greeks On The Roof*, a chat show along the lines of Britain's *The Kumars At No 42*, was axed. Friends said it was - fittingly because of their families' heritage - while holidaying in the Mediterranean that Coustas and Betsis fell in love.

They became engaged in September, 2004, and five months later she walked down the aisle in the Greek Orthodox Church in Rose Bay wearing a delicate ivory gown with silver embellishment on the bust designed by Collette Dinnigan. Their guest list was like a celebrity who's who, many of them from the Australian TV and film industry, and included actress Rachel Griffiths and husband Andrew Taylor, Vince Colosimo, Anthony La Paglia and wife Gia Carides, singer Tina Arena, actor Alex Dimitriades, shoe designer Terry Biviano, Harry M. Miller and Coustas's long-time friend, "Wog Boy" Nick Giannopoulos.

Young Tomas, a keen skier and Tigers fan who plays a mean game of Scrabble and loves watching the *Star Wars* movies from beginning to end, split his time between his two families - his mum Dunstan, and dad Betsis and stepmum Coustas. An all-Aussie boy, Tomas loved the Bondi surf and watching wrestling on subscription TV.

Meanwhile, his mother's career took off into the entertainment stratosphere when she was invited to appear on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as a baby expert.

Dunstan told the host that her gift also allowed her to diagnose moods and even illnesses. She told Oprah's millions of viewers worldwide: "Other people might hear a note but I sort of get the whole symphony. So when someone's speaking, I get all this information that other people might not pick up."

The appearance led to a book deal and other offers and Dunstan decided

to move to Los Angeles last year to pursue her career - taking Tomas with her. Meanwhile, her long-time boyfriend, Australian songwriter and musician Mark Rivett, has been flying between Sydney and Los Angeles.

Rivett, a guitarist who loves jazz and the big-band sound, is the senior partner and musical director of North Sydney musical studios Song Zu. Dunstan has set up home in the ritzy Los Angeles beachside suburb of Pacific Palisades, which is also home to Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks. She is reportedly friends with singer Pink.

Tomas was enrolled in the Marquez Elementary School which, appropriately, given his musical heritage, has a strong focus on its music classes.

Coustas describes Tomas as a very special boy. Dunstan, however, would not be interviewed for this article.

"Like every child he had special qualities and he is a huge asset to everybody," says Coustas. "He's such a loving, open, wonderful child and very bright, very affectionate. I would hate to see any of those qualities shut down by him being estranged from us."

Betsis claims that since Dunstan took Tomas to Los Angeles, she has failed

to stick to an agreement for him and Coustas to see Tomas during the Christmas and Easter holidays - four months of the year.

It was from the Marquez school on April 3 that he picked up Tomas in a rented 2009 grey Kia Sorrento, sparking the child-abduction alert that has seen father and son on the run from both the LAPD and FBI.

As tough as it has been for her watching the drama unfold from Sydney, Coustas has every admiration for her husband's actions.

"Mark is a good man. He is there for Tomas and he will do everything to make sure he's all right . . . that's the message that George wants to give to his son," she says. "His destiny can be taken in a whole other direction if we are not careful at this point."

On Thursday, when she finished that letter to Tomas, Coustas fired up the Skype videolink over which they had been keeping in touch for the previous 12 days and read her words to her stepson.

Moments later, Betsis burst into tears and hugged 10-year-old Tomas tightly before letting him go. His Californian lawyer drove Tomas to the Hollywood police station, where he was handed to child-protection authorities and by Thursday night Tomas was believed to be back with Dunstan.

The usually upbeat Coustas has spent much of the past week in tears, sometimes barely changing out of her pyjamas, on the phone and videolink day and night because of the time difference. On Thursday, she was said by friends to be inconsolable, with Betsis facing possible criminal charges.

He has handed over his passport and his lawyer is negotiating with the LA District Attorney before Betsis gives himself up.

As for Tomas, he is heading back to school after a spring break spent in an anonymous apartment hiding from the authorities. He loves his dad and he loves his mum - but in the end, he may be the one who suffers.

Most Aussies don't cook with their kids

Two thirds of Australian parents find it too time consuming and difficult to cook with their kids, research shows. But, says NSW dietician Geraldine Georgeou, the practice was a key way to instil lifelong healthy eating choices in children. "In my clinical experience, I have seen enormous benefits from involving kids in the sourcing and preparation of food who then go on to make healthier choices," Ms Georgeou says. "Australian parents need tools to help them foster healthier eating habits and take action."

The research, conducted by Newspoll on behalf of margarine company Flora, took in the views of a representative sample of 303 parents who had children aged three to 17 years. The poll also found 44 per cent of parents said their children had no interest in food preparation, and a further one in three parents were not personally interested in cooking. Almost 40 per cent of parents also mistakenly believed saturated fat was important in their childrens' diets, when it actually increased the risk of cardiovascular disease.