Terry Wiles has no arms or legs, but he is a dauntless bloke with a great sense of humour. Now 17, he was a victim of thalidomide. "Anyone who watches him in the television film of his life should never feel dissatisfied again," says actress Judi Dench. Here scriptwriter Marjorie Wallace recalls how she met him. Australians can see the film this week.

We made a strange foursome sitting in the small, shabby, cluttered front room of No 1 Nursery Cottages drinking tea from cracked cups as the rain streamed down the window panes. There was Leonard Wiles, in his late 50s, big, broad-shouldered, with thinning hair and a lined, kindly face which retained its quiet strength and sensitivity. Next to him was Hazel, his wife, plump and motherly, almost overwhelming the rickety chair which supported her, dressed with careless disregard, pale and tired-looking.

I had pride of place on the lumpy settee, clutching my reporter's notebook and unable to keep my eyes and thoughts off the fourth member of the party, an extraordinary scrap of humanity wriggling on my knee and bouncing like a rubber ball. Terry Wiles was 10 years old, then, this jumping bean in my lap: 10 years old and 60 cm (2ft) high, one of the worst victims of the thalidomide tragedy.

He had been born without arms and with tiny seal-like flippers where his legs should be. One eye had hung uselessly down his cheek and had had to be removed. His sight in the other was poor. I sat there and clung on to him, but there was very little to hold. Though he might be just a scrap, he was certainly a lively one.

"Tarumtara," bellowed Terry. "Ladeez and gentlemen. Allow me to commence!" Then, in a vibrant voice, so loud it seemed impossible for it to come from so small a source, he began to sing:

"A personality so big you can't keep him down"