

Suburb Style



Suburb Style editor, Deborah Warland talks to local residents

THE SINGING ACTOR

featuring Lynton Black

Lynton was born in Huddersfield and although his parents were not musical, many other members of the family were, including his grandfather and great great grandfather. He was 7 years old when he realised that he loved music and at the tender age of 16 he became the youngest bass ever to sing in the famous Huddersfield Choral Society.

It was then that he was advised to have voice training at the Royal Academy of Music. So, once a week he went down by train to London to be tutored by Henry Cummings. It was Cummings that suggested to Lynton that he applied for a scholarship – which he was duly awarded – and his full-time music studies began in 1979.

In his first year he lived in a hall of residence in Denmark Hill. Lynton told me, "I was an exemplary student – I was like a sponge – wanting to learn everything including the very difficult skill of reading at sight. To accomplish this I was steered towards a Professor at the Academy called Peter Lea-Cox who suggested that a good way to learn this was to sing in a church choir. As Peter was also the organist and the director of the choir at St Jude's on the Suburb, this is where I came every Sunday to perform Evensong. It took me an age to get here from Denmark Hill but I was paid the princely sum of £2 per service. I remember that the rather eccentric Peter actually lived in the choir vestry where he had a mattress and used the incense coals to heat his baked beans!"

At the end of that year Lynton had to find somewhere else to live so Peter urged him to take an ad in the Parish Magazine – a reply came from a certain Mrs Earl. Lynton goes on to say, "She was an elderly lady who had a bedsit within her house in Temple Fortune Lane. My accommodation included a small sink, a tiny fridge and a two-ring burner with grill – all on a coin paid gas meter. I paid £20 per week and Mrs Earl's only stipulation was that I must bathe in the morning as she liked to do so at night. I stayed there for 5 years continuing my studies and, during that time, the rent never went up and she kept re-feeding the meter with my own coins! Despite her mature years she was known as 'Freckles'. Professionally she had



A casually dressed Lynton Black and, right, in Manon

been a hospital matron and, perhaps as a consequence of this, was very forthright.

When Lynton finished at the Royal Academy of Music he was awarded the Recital Diploma, which is the highest accolade possible for a singer. He then bought a flat in Leytonstone. However, he kept in touch with Freckles and came back every week to do her 'big shop' and to look after various domestic matters. When Mrs Earl's health deteriorated he found her a companion and she lived on until the age of 96. On her death she left the house and all its contents to Lynton and he has continued to live there for the last 18 years. He told me, "I've tried to keep it as she would have wanted – with respect to her – but not as a museum."

As Lynton's career has developed he finds himself increasingly in demand on the international stage – in fact he now spends between 4-6 months a year overseas. Although this might sound glamorous to most of us, he does not entirely agree. "I hate airports – the only one I have time for is City Airport. I also dislike hotels so I invariably rent an apartment in order that I can come and go as I please. For example, in Spain a performance may not finish until 1am and I have to unwind after that so I may sit in the flat having a quiet whisky at 3am."

Lynton has performed in Salzburg, Munich, Madrid, Basel, Paris and recently toured in Japan with the Royal Opera. He speaks French, Italian, German and some Spanish. What, I asked him is one of the most essential factors for success today? "I believe that Maria Callas was the first opera star to be a 'singing actor' and the ability to act

has become an essential part of an opera singer's skills." As Lynton is known for his comedic talent the description 'singing actor' could not suit him better. For instance when he recently played the part of Geronte in Manon Lescaut he was booed like a pantomime villain at the curtain call, before the audience burst into applause.

My next question was what does it feel like to return to the Suburb after a some time abroad? "When I come back I ask myself, am I not the luckiest person to live in such an environment? It's like being in a country village within spitting distance of central London. I love walking from Temple Fortune Lane across to Wild Hatch and onto the Heath extension and up to The Spaniards. My ego is not big enough to want a memorial bench, but as you ask me, it would be half way up the extension looking back to St Jude's. Another walk I enjoy is through Golders Hill Park and on to Hampstead, finishing off with lunch and a pint at The Holly Bush. Spring this year on the Suburb has been phenomenal and walking along Meadway and then turning left into Heathgate and the church has been one cascade of blossom after another."

Locally, Lynton has worked a lot with John Bradbury at UCS and has also performed at the Last Night of the St Jude's Proms. Aside from singing at all the UK's major venues he enjoys participating in opera workshops for youngsters at, for example, the ENO, Glyndebourne and the Royal Opera House. Lynton believes that apart from being about glorious music, opera is also about discipline and behaviour – knowing when to be quiet and having to be on schedule. "I've got a lot out of working with Gareth Malone (the BAFTA winning presenter and brains behind the TV series The Choir) and kids from run down Council Housing estates". The flip side of this coin is that he has sung at a private dinner for Queen Elizabeth at St James's Palace. In the summer he will again be singing his favourite role as Bartolo in The Marriage of Figaro – this time with Holland Park Opera. He loves Holland Park. "Despite the low pay, the ethos of the management is to be applauded and with the top ticket price being £40 it is affordable."

Despite the fact that Lynton does not like airports, he must have been fascinated by his time in the air as he now holds a Private Pilot's Licence and flies from Stapleford in Essex once a month if his schedule permits. His other hobby is membership of The Savage Club which he describes as 'a rather bohemian establishment devoted to those who love literature and the arts'. It meets within the National Liberal Club near to Waterloo Station. Lynton's humour and wit is so infectious it is hard to remain unmoved by it. Indeed, during this interview we laughed so much that my husband came down from his study to find out what was going on. However, his final anecdote was the most amusing of all. "I was singing the role of the Sacristan in Tosca at the Paris Opera. As the part entailed me being on stage only for the first 30 minutes I asked the conductor if it would be all right for me to have a curtain call on the first and last nights but for the other performances could I leave the House when I finished – he agreed. So, on one occasion I speedily got out of my costume, dashed to the Gare du Nord, boarded Eurostar, then strode from Waterloo to The Savage Club savouring the fact that the time difference was working in my favour. I knew a pal of mine would be there, so I casually strolled in and offered to buy him a drink. After he had almost choked on his gin, he muttered "but I thought you were meant to be performing in Tosca!"

My memories of this interview with such a larger than life character are still making me chuckle today. **S**



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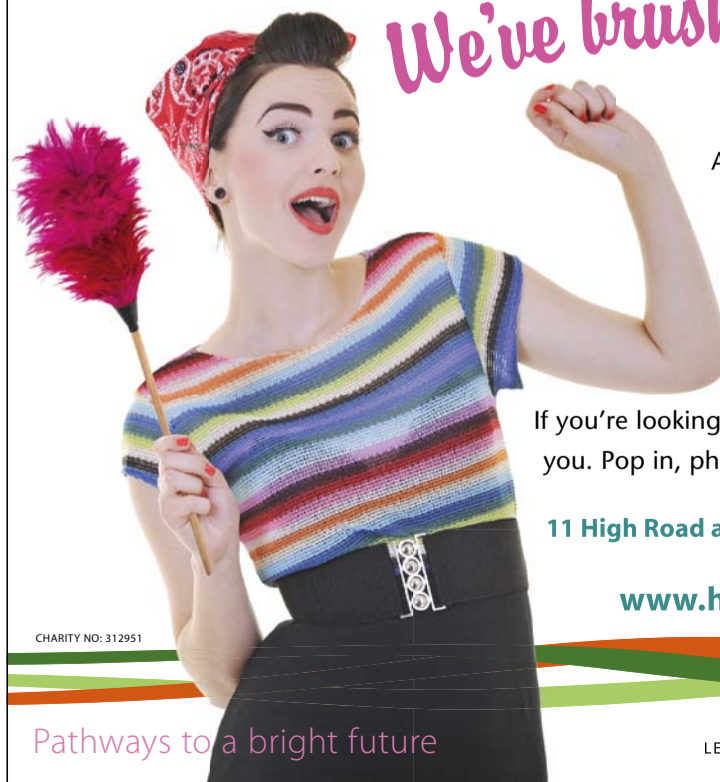
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