

Parallel universe

Piers Ford goes in search of singers who have managed to forge other careers alongside their singing – a sensible option in today’s music world

If there’s a tie that binds professional singers across every genre, it’s the intensity of the feeling that they were born to sing. Whether it’s an ambition that’s simply part of their DNA or a realisation that dawns slowly and becomes more insistent later on, the need to sing is the Leitmotif that drives and sustains them.

Practically speaking, however, the need alone doesn’t put bread on the table! So it’s no surprise to discover that many singers lead parallel lives: alternative careers that sometimes nurture and complement the singing but are often essential, simply to underwrite the expenses of even the most established professional.

Sometimes, these other lives take over completely. The late tenor Roy Ashton spent the decade after the Second World War juggling two jobs: as the promising Glyndebourne and Covent Garden principal who joined Britten’s English Opera Group in 1947, understudying Peter Pears and creating the role of the Mayor in *Albert Herring*; and as a successful makeup artist, much in demand by the burgeoning post-war British film industry.

For a while Ashton spent his summers in the studios, earning the money that allowed him to sing in operas and concerts – often just covering expenses – during the winter. But by 1955, despite his best efforts to keep both careers separate, his commitments started to clash and it was obvious that film work would provide a more financially stable and less itinerant future.

He went on to achieve lasting fame as the chief makeup artist on the great Hammer horror films. But as the illustrated biography,

Greasepaint and Gore: The Hammer Monsters of Roy Ashton (Tomahawk Press), makes clear, he carried a lingering sense of what might have been for the rest of his life. ‘Nothing can compare with the thrill of appearing before a great gathering, of hearing the thunder of the applause delivered to a sincere artist,’ he wrote.

There was no such dilemma for bass baritone Julian Saïpe who called time on his burgeoning professional singing career with what sounds like a sigh of relief, seizing instead the opportunity to head his wife’s high-end catering business, Zafferano, in 2003.

Saïpe grew up steeped in music: his mother was a concert pianist and he performed numerous boy soprano roles at the English National Opera and Covent Garden. After studying at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, he built an enviable CV as a soloist to watch, and even sang on film soundtracks like *Lord of the Rings* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*, when he realised that his heart wasn’t in it. ‘There was a kind of fight inside,’ he says. ‘It was more psychological than the traditional worries about not being able to get any work, not being good enough or not wanting to sing in the chorus for ever. It wasn’t any of that. I think it was more a hangover from being a child performer: being a singer didn’t feel like a grown-up vocation! Even singing Wagner and big bass roles, it still felt like the world of the child artist. I had a good voice and on paper I should have built an international career as a soloist. I did it for four years, without really enjoying it. But it was a very difficult thing to give up, for me and for people around me.’ Saïpe stepped sideways, exploiting his organisational skills to set up a business with the aim of producing opera for events before taking over as managing director at Zafferano in 2003. He is occasionally able to introduce operatic elements for clients’ parties.

For most singers, of course, Saïpe’s decision would have been an unthinkable sacrifice. Once the need to sing is laid bare it becomes a compelling force. Singer/songwriter Teresa Disken first became aware of it as a law student and later, teaching English in Greece, the pull became stronger as she grew fascinated by the country’s music and influences from further afield. But it wasn’t until she was in her late twenties that she began to explore her desire to sing and write songs.

Today, Disken divides her week in half: four days are spent as a lawyer at the Society of London Theatre; the other three are dedicated to writing and singing, as a solo singer and with her band. She acknowledges the luck of having a flexible employer and the different driving forces of the two worlds that occasionally make her a self-confessed Jekyll and Hyde. ‘I was initially hired to work part-time but financial necessity has made me step up the days,’ she says. ‘It’s quite a pinch, and there’s always the psychological challenge of knowing you don’t have much time to be creative. On the other hand, I work for an organisation where there are several very artistic people who understand what I’m trying to do. Also, as a lawyer in the business, I’m probably a reasonable judge of what does and doesn’t sound right in contractual terms! People in the music industry might be wary of someone who knows their stuff.’

Disken has largely recorded cover versions to date – visitors to her MySpace site can hear an absorbing take on Mary Coughlan’s



Teresa Disken spends four days as a lawyer at the Society of London Theatre, dedicating the other three to writing and singing as a solo singer and with her band



Tenor turned make-up artist **Roy Ashton** making up Oliver Reed during the making of *The Curse of the Werewolf*



Budding property developer **Shona Lindsay** is hoping that her expanding portfolio will allow her to be more creative with the singing roles she chooses to take