

THE ROAD AHEAD

Just a couple of years ago, Toby Spence was being hailed as one of the great British tenors of his generation. Then disaster struck. Battling with cancer was just the start of a process of reconstructing his voice and his life as a singer – a journey full of revelations and personal insights.

Interview by Ashutosh Khandekar

It was all going so well: just into his forties, Toby Spence's career seemed to be on an upward trajectory that was showing no signs of slowing down. Having garnered some brilliant reviews for his David in Covent Garden's production of *Die Meistersinger*, he had gone on to sing his first Faust at the Coliseum and was looking forward to his debut as Captain Vere in English National Opera's new *Billy Budd*. Then came the thunderbolt: 'I'd been noticing a few problems: a bit of tightness when I was singing and difficulty in clearing my throat – but nothing terrible. I went to get it checked out and had some routine tests. When the news came, I went into shock.'

Spence was diagnosed with cancer of the thyroid, perilously close to the precious

vocal cords that had given him a growing and successful livelihood for more than a decade. The only option was to operate, with a strong chance that the nerves around his larynx might permanently be damaged. 'I was faced with a pretty grim choice: would I rather die than not sing, or should I carry on singing with the risk that I could die?'

The operation went ahead. Spence had his thyroid and lymph nodes in his throat removed and he emerged from six hours of surgery with the cancer under control, but with no control at all over his voice. What followed was a slow, painful process of recovery where Spence had to 'reconstruct' his voice with his singing teacher, David Pollard. It took months of physical and mental rehabilitation, including

psychotherapy, to get to a point where he was able to perform in public again.

I met Spence just a few days after he had performed his first *Dream of Gerontius* since his illness. Life seemed like normal in some respects – the chat of a busy singer full of his most recent triumph. I had got to know him years earlier when he was a carefree young choral scholar at New College, Oxford, with a casual, typically student-like approach to singing. Here, however, was a more reflective artist, passionate about his career, and both chastened and enlightened by his brush with catastrophe.

'Singing *Gerontius* again was an emotional day for me. I really didn't know how things would go with my voice, and that sense of uncertainty felt dangerous. I told myself that the only way I can find

out what's possible is by doing it – it was a mixture of fear and nonchalance that drove me on.' In the end, the performance in Gloucester Cathedral was a triumph. 'I found myself singing in a very disciplined way and it came out more beautifully than ever before,' says the tenor. 'When it came to the curtain call, well, I usually match my bows to the solemnity of the piece I'm singing – I strongly believe that a performance only ends when you leave the building. But on this occasion, I took the applause with a huge, childish grin on my face.'

There is much talk of 'before' and 'after' in any discussion about Spence's career. Was the cancer in any way an opportunity to start again, to eradicate ingrained bad habits and to explore new avenues with his voice? 'To be honest, I just wanted the voice I had before, because that was going so well,' admits Spence. 'My ambitions were snowballing before the cancer hit and I was happy with

what was happening in my life. I thought any change wouldn't be good. Starting again was painful on many levels, but one of the things that all this has taught me is to appreciate what I've got and work with it, rather than be sorry for what's not there.'

Even as he rebuilds his voice and his technique, Spence acknowledges that, deep down, everything has changed: 'I realised pretty quickly after the operation that I would have to feel different, even if I didn't sound that different. I was going to have to approach singing differently. I'm not as cavalier as I was before, and in some ways it means that I've left a sense of freedom behind me; but I'm confident that it will come back, because it's part of who I am as a person. What I have gained is a more rigorous approach to technique, and a voice that feels rock solid and dependable.'

To all intents and purposes, it's business as usual for Spence. We chatted over a quick

lunch (expertly warmed-up ready meals from Waitrose) in his comfortable kitchen in the heart of Islington, just as he was preparing to jet off to Austria to rehearse for a run of Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress* at the Vienna State Opera. He told me how much he'd enjoyed singing the role of Essex in *Gloriana* at the Royal Opera House: 'It's not "obvious" music, but the more you get to know Britten's score the better it becomes'. Richard Jones's clever, vivid and often beautiful production (released on disc this month by Opus Arte) had just come to the end of its run.

As well as returning to the role of Tom Rakewell, Spence was also looking forward to his debut as the Emperor Titus in Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* at the Bavarian State Opera in the New Year, giving him the opportunity to deliver a short history lesson: 'I think it's dramatically the most challenging role I've done so far. People ►

Toby Spence.
Photo by Mitch Jenkins



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As Essex in Britten's *Gloriana* at the Royal Opera House, London. Photo by Clive Barda

◀ think of Tito as a grand old statesman, and his gesture of clemency as a product of the wisdom of age. In fact, if you look at the records, this act of forgiveness towards those plotting against him was one of the first gestures made by the young Emperor Titus at the start of his reign, when he was in his 20s. It marked him out as a genuine leader and stopped his critics in their tracks.'

From Britten's dashing Earl of Essex to Stravinsky's rakish Tom to Mozart's clement Titus – it's a hallmark of Spence's career that he doesn't like to be pigeonholed as a particular type of singer. On the surface, he's an impeccably well-mannered product of the English upper middle classes, but vocally he's struck out on his own path. He is not your stereotypical, strangled English tenor from the cathedral choir tradition, and he's emphatic about the pros and cons of his choral scholar background: 'A lot of British singers are conditioned by where they come from, and they never think about how to take things forward with their voice. The strong choral tradition serves us well in many ways. It teaches sound musicianship, professionalism and a sense of camaraderie – a typically British easygoing friendliness. In terms of sound, however, it produces a slender, clean type of voice which isn't very suited to most opera.'

Spence's voice is actually rather hard to define. It is grounded in an affable Englishness, yet with a dark, shadowy intensity that suggests an unexpected, complex inner world: 'I don't have the classic English tenor sound,' he says. 'I think there's something more gritty and more full of drama in me than that. In some ways, I can sing anything; but I thrive when I do things my own way rather than the way people think I should do them.'

He admits that for singers with a mind of their own, the world of opera can have its frustrations. 'I often feel like a pawn in someone else's game, caught between the conductor and the director and a host of other people who are telling me what to do. It drives me mad, but I know now that you can't fight it. If I'd been told 20 years ago that one of the things you have to put up with as an opera singer is to be treated like a child, I might have done things differently ... but I'm good at biting my lip and getting on with it now.'

'I do a lot of preparation for a role by myself, and I like working things out in my head, when I'm in bed or on a walk. What interests me is the interpretation, ►

◀ the psychology, sitting with the score and figuring out the truth behind the character and then telling the audience something they can believe in.’

Is there anything he just won't do? 'I'm not interested in Rossini opera – it does my head in. I sang *Almaviva* at Covent Garden a few years ago, and I wasn't very good at it. I found it shallow. I couldn't get a hold on the character and I didn't get the comedy. I don't think I've got the funny bones for that sort of thing.'

One of the more positive outcomes of Spence's illness has been a chance to set up a short summer series of song recitals at Wardsbrook, his brother Magnus's Tudor house near

Tunbridge Wells in the glorious East Sussex countryside. The series was launched earlier this year with luminaries such as Sir Thomas Allen, Sarah Connolly, Stéphane Degout and Christiane Karg. 'Our masterstroke is that before every concert, the audience has a chance to meet the performer,' Spence explains. 'It's a great way to break down barriers from the audience's point of view and the singers feel really relaxed too. It's a very friendly, warm and informal occasion – the sort of thing that opera singers don't get to experience very much.' All proceeds from the concerts go to St Michael's Hospice, specialising in palliative care.

Meanwhile, that old ambition, seemingly lost to illness, is snowballing again. Spence used to be afraid of the stigma that the

'C-word' might bring to his future prospects, but he needn't have worried. In fact, he has been disarmingly open about his cancer in the press, and has become something of a role model in a world where personal frailties are often swept under the carpet: 'Cancer isn't a life sentence any more and people need to know that,' he says. 'For all its faults and frustrations, the opera world is full of people who have real goodness and who do real good to the soul. The moments when I'm standing on stage, singing beautiful music and it's all going well – those moments are worth a lot. One of the things I've learnt is that the voice is an extension of yourself and as long as you've got yourself sorted out, then the voice will follow suit.' ■



As Tom Rakewell in Paris Opera's production of *The Rake's Progress*

The Royal Opera's production of *Gloriana*, starring Toby Spence as Essex, will be released this month by Opus Arte on DVD and Blu-ray (OA1124D/ OABD7134D). www.opusarte.com

TOBY SPENCE'S DIARY

OPERA

2013 | Nov 14-27
Munich, Germany
Die Zauberflöte/ Tamino
Bavarian State Opera

2014 | Feb 10-26
Munich, Germany
La clemenza di Tito/ title role
Bavarian State Opera

2014 | May 11-18
Vienna, Austria
La clemenza di Tito/ title role
Vienna State Opera

2014 | Jul 16-19
Munich, Germany
La clemenza di Tito/ title role
Munich Opera Festival

CONCERTS

2013 | Nov 30
Paris, France
Schubert *Offertorium*; Beethoven *Christus am Ölberg*
Orchestre de Chambre de Paris

2013 | Dec 13-15
London, UK
Handel *Messiah*
Royal Albert Hall

2014 | Apr 10
Liverpool, UK
Mahler *Das Lied von der Erde*
Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra

2014 | Apr 28
London, UK
BBC Lunchtime Concert (programme tbc)
Wigmore Hall

2013 | May 2
London, UK
Solo recital (programme tbc)
Milton Court Concert Hall, Barbican Centre

2014 | May 29-31
Munich, Germany
Buckner Mass No. 1 in D minor
Bavarian RSO / John Eliot Gardiner

2014 | Jun 21
San Francisco, US
Britten *Serenade for Tenor, Horn and Strings*
San Francisco Symphony Orchestra / Michael Tilson Thomas

Visit www.operabase.com for further details of Toby Spence's diary, or follow Toby himself on Twitter: [@tobyspence](https://twitter.com/tobyspence)