



PAUL COX

Paige turner

Antonia Couling catches up with Elaine Paige on the eve of a national tour and CD release, to talk musical theatre

As familiar as we may be with the milestone British musicals of the 1970s and '80s that changed the face of musical theatre, it is the distinctive sound of a particular voice that articulated those works that brings the music to life. To many, Elaine Paige will always be thought of as the 'real' voice of Eva Peron, the only voice to give 'Memory' its true sound, the absolute vocal personification of Norma Desmond, and quite simply the Florence from *Chess*, that others can only hope to emulate.

And she is still very much going strong, with a highly successful show on Radio 2, a national tour and the coinciding release of a CD. The tour and CD have sprung from a listeners' poll for her radio show which asked them to vote for their favourite songs from the shows. The album will consist of the top 10 songs plus two others that were voted for, and the tour will run along the theme of a musical theatre journey. So which musical came out on top? 'Les Mis – by miles. It's the most successful musical probably of all time. It's been seen by something like over 40 million people worldwide. So I'm going to sing "Bring him home". I always think it's quite interesting for a woman to sing a bloke's song.'

In view of how much in charge of the whole operation she is, from choosing the material to routing the songs and discussing the arrangements with arrangers, it strikes me how much things have changed for the stars of musical theatre over the past 20 years. Paige, along with perhaps the likes of Michael Ball and Julia McKenzie, is one of the last musical theatre singers to be a real household name. There are just as many talented singers among younger generations – Ruthie Henshall, Maria Friedman – but, very unjustly, they have never crossed the line into people's living rooms in the same way. I ask Paige what she thinks might have made it more difficult for them to do this. 'I was very fortunate to have been the one to ride along with Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice on that new wave of British musical theatre. I was at the very forefront of that at the very beginning – *Superstar*, *Joseph* and *Evita* and *Cats*. *Superstar* and *Evita* changed musical theatre for us in every respect. Prior to that Lionel Bart was the last really great British musical writer, with *Oliver*. But Andrew and Tim made it really modern because of the way they wrote and the fact that they did it on albums first. They brought it to the masses through the charts and then chose to put the shows on stage. It was a very clever

wheeze that, really. But also, aside from the marketing aspect of it, the writing was so very different. It was rock opera. That's what *Superstar* was and that's what appealed to the young.

'And I was right at the beginning of that and it was fantastic that that was the case. People like Ruthie came along a bit later and have not had that. Because there is no more new writing coming along in the same way. It's a bit thin on the ground. In America there is maybe, but here there's been no one to come along in a major way to follow in Andrew and Tim's footsteps. I was just in the right place at the right time to be offered those fantastic roles.

'Having seen *Evita* for the first time ever in my life, last week, I sat there marvelling at what a great piece of theatre writing it was. It had huge impact when I did it 28 years ago, and I now see why, what the fuss was about. Because it's a fantastically well-written piece, a wonderful part for a woman – you'd have to be a big klutz to mess it up! Because it has everything in it, both emotionally, lyrically and melodically. Had that not been written and I not got it, I might not be enjoying this place in my life right now.'

But the lack of good roles is not just a problem for up-and-coming singers. Paige herself has experienced frustration at the lack of good parts for her these days. 'The last thing I did was at the New York City Opera playing Mrs Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*. There have been suggestions for me to do things, but nothing new in the theatre that I could play at my age now.'

I wonder what expectations young singers today have of where their careers will take them. 'If you were going into it now I'd be terrified, I mean, what is out there? I suppose it's those rock musicals-type shows, like *Mamma Mia* or *We will Rock you*.' And yet, I point out, the singers seem almost incidental to the event of those shows. 'Yes,' agrees Paige, 'they're more ensemble pieces and it's the music we all know and love that is the main feature. I fear for the new performers when they come up all wide-eyed and say "I want to be like you" and I look at them and think, God, do you know what you've chosen to do? How difficult and hard it is? Are you prepared for all the rejection you're going to have to take? For that not to eat away at you in the end? And are you prepared for all the hard work and absolute commitment to it and devotion to it?'

And yet those difficulties and needs in musical theatre performers have always been there, since the 1930s, although there was always the balancing element of the equation that said that if you were someone likely to shine, then you would shine. Nowadays the opportunities for that to happen seem so limited. Trying to be upbeat about it, Paige points out that change is constant. 'Don't forget also that in years gone past people like Ethel Merman had shows written for them, specifically. And even I haven't enjoyed that luxury, well, maybe once with *Chess*, which was written with me in mind. So things change all the time.' And then, surrendering to the turn the conversation is taking, she turns the tables on me, and asks, 'Do you think musical theatre is going to survive?'

It's a hard one to call, also because I can't bear the thought of its demise, but I venture that what may happen is that interesting work may move over into the world of opera, and those other Madame Tussaud-type shows, while having little to do with theatre itself, might take over the West End as tourist attractions, if they haven't done so already. Paige agrees, 'Yes, that does look like the way it's going at the moment. Those shows are more sort of spectacle, rather than genuine writing.' Which is all very well but it's a shame that people are losing the knowledge of what musical theatre really is.

But there's always hope, especially when things like *Jerry Springer the Opera* come along. Paige claps her hands in delight when I mention the show. 'I think that show moved musical theatre on yet again. It was so operatic, it had all the structure of a proper opera with all

those banal lyrics. That juxtaposition was what made it. I laughed like a drain. Many people have said to me in my career that you have an obligation as an artist to shock people and to not play safe – to try to change things and not go down the safe route. *Evita* and all those shows challenged the status quo too.'

What was it that propelled Paige herself into a life in musical theatre? 'It was really my music teacher, Mrs Anne Hill, who was one of the first people – in my school life anyway – who inspired me with

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music and who helped me appreciate classical music in particular, because I didn't hear much of that at home. My family background was much more immersed in jazz, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Perry Como. My father was an amateur drummer all his life, and had a band of his own, so every weekend he would be out gigging. Sometimes we would go and watch him.

'My mother had a fine singing voice. I think it was part of their courtship that they met singing in concert parties together at the British Legion and so on, in the war and prior to the war. And they would have evenings visiting friends' households and would sing round the piano and speak monologues. My grandfather on my father's side would write monologues, which I still have in my possession. So the theatre is in my family very definitely, in an amateur way but it was there – the creativity. Mrs Hill at school was quite visionary really when I look back at the things she got us to do. We always had to do an end of term production which was the highlight of my entire schooling year! In fact I used to steal out of regular classes on the premise that I'd been given permission to go and sit in the hall and learn my piece. She got us to do things like Handel's *Messiah* – to sing that when you're 14 is quite something.

'Then she put on a production of *The Boy Mozart*, which was like a little operetta with a little storyline and all the hits. I played Susanna and that was the one where I knew I wanted to do musical theatre. That and the fact that *West Side Story* had just come out on film. I used to hang out with the sixth form girls and they were all into that, and we would play the record over and over again. I wanted to be Maria, I had it all mapped out. And then when I saw the film I was completely mesmerised by it and thought, that's what I want to do. My parents were fantastic and would support myself and my sister in whatever we wanted to do. So eventually my father said, either you can stay on and do A-levels, or you can go to drama school. What fantastic parents to have worked that one out! And it wasn't any of that ghastly pushy stage school parent stuff, they just saw what I needed.

So I went off to Ada Foster's. It was a stage school because I was too young to go to any of the serious drama schools – they all said go away and grow up a little bit, but I didn't want to wait – I was 15 and I wanted to do it right away. I don't know whether I would have thought of it myself if my father hadn't suggested it. I was aware of what an opportunity I had been given and didn't take it lightly.'

And from there she went on to be one of the greatest vocal influences of her generation. Undoubtedly it was the uniqueness of her sound that worked so well in those revolutionary new musicals. 'I never thought of my voice as a musical-theatre type voice. The first songs I was interested in singing were the Everly brothers or the Mozart at school of course. But I never really thought about sound and it was only when I came to do my first album, *Evita*, that I realised

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that my sound was different. But as you say, those shows were written for a different sounding voice, it was pop-rock, it wasn't your big brash Ethel Merman type thing. Technology had come along too, so we had microphones and we could sing differently.'

Every generation naturally has its influences but I wondered who could have been hers to come up with such a unique sound. 'Judy Garland was a slightly older sound than I was wanting to emulate. I suppose it was Streisand for me, because I was always fascinated by how she could move from a chest voice to a head sound and you couldn't hear the break. And that's what I always tried to achieve in musical theatre. A lot of people have a definite break in sound from the chest to the head voice and I don't like that. That's what is so wonderful about opera singers, of course, the *passaggio* is hidden through their technique.'

So is the melody or the lyric the main focus in preparing for a role? 'Being involved so much in new works, it's always been important to get the story across. And the lyrics are always so important to me. Although I was not the first to play the role, when I was working with Andrew on *Sunset Boulevard*, with the song "As if We Never Said Goodbye", I read the lyric over and over again, which I do – I read the lyrics over and over and over again so I understand what the character is trying to get across – and it was apparent to me that in the middle of the song she says "I've come home at last" and it seemed to me to be what the story and the whole character was about. This was for her the main moment – it's where everything landed for her. This was what she was wanting to achieve from the beginning of the piece to here: I've come back, arrived home. But of course the melody was initially, when I'd heard others singing it, [sings] "I've come home at last", it wasn't anything more than that, a line that was just written in an even tempo. But when I came to do it I asked if I could change the melody and lengthen the word "home", so that it would go "I've come hooooooooome at last", because lyrically that was important to me and he allowed me to do it, and ever after that's how it was sung.

'Even now, with these songs for this new album, my interpretation will come from reading the lyrics and finding out what they mean to me. So they won't be sung as characters in a show, but I have to find a meaning that is personal to me. And that is bound to influence the melody. And that to me is the measure of a hit song, when the lyrics and the melody genuinely sit – the emphasis of the melody fits the

emphasis of the lyric and you can't separate them. If you get a melody where the important note falls on the word "and" or something you're going to be in great trouble. The great writers knew that, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart.'

In one final rapture about the joys of musical theatre at its best we agree that it doesn't reduce musical theatre at all to say that there are certain formulas like these that need to be followed. The great opera writers knew this too, in particular Verdi and Puccini. 'You have to understand the art and the craft of it for it to work.' I mention how almost anything can be hung on a competent musical theatre structure, like *Chess*, which, I confess, along with *My Fair Lady* is my all-time favourite musical. Written by Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus with Tim Rice's lyrics, *Chess* didn't work quite as well on stage as it did on the pre-released album, possibly because it was a tad too sophisticated, but nonetheless, the writing is of top-notch quality. 'They are the most amazing modern-day writers,' says Paige. 'That's opera. I'm so pleased you like it because I think it's totally underrated. To me that was probably the greatest musical theatre piece written in the '80s. Some of the linking passages and the lyrics... That is modern opera to me.'

And suddenly our conversation breaks into tearful half-sentences as we enthuse about this wonderful piece. I can hardly speak about songs such as 'You and I' at the end of the musical, which is so emotional and yet the antithesis of a schmaltzy love song, drawn instead from the harsh reality that sometimes you can go through an amazing amount of loss and hardship and you still have to recognise that there will be no reward at the end. Paige holds up her hand as we both almost dissolve. 'Don't!' she says. She lists other pieces from the show. 'The Anthem, The Argument, and Nobody's side – that's a clever lyric. Nobody's on anybody's side, we all have to stand alone and make our own decisions. It is one of the most brilliant musicals. I wish they would write more. It was wonderful to be involved in the writing process, going over to Stockholm every weekend... We would go into the studio and play around with keys and bits of songs. And they got to know my voice really well, so they knew where the ideal place in my singing voice was – still today I sing those songs in exactly the same keys. It was a joy and pleasure to witness that process. And they were meticulous.'

Would she sing it again if they revived it? 'I think it might be something I wouldn't mind doing again. It was so emotionally uplifting and sad at the same time.' That would be something. Watch this space. ■

Elaine Paige in concert - tour dates:

- 29 October**, Cheltenham Centaur Racecourse, 01242 572 573
- 30 October**, Sheffield City Hall, 01142 789 789
- 1 November**, Glasgow, Royal Concert Hall, 0141 353 8000
- 2 November**, Edinburgh, Usher Hall, 0131 228 1155
- 3 November**, Blackpool Opera House, 01253 292 029
- 5 November**, Nottingham, Royal Concert Hall, 0115 989 5555
- 6 November**, Southend Cliffs Pavilion, 01702 351 135
- 7 November**, Northampton, Derrigate, 01604 624 811
- 9 November**, Gateshead, The Sage, 0191 443 4661
- 10 November**, Croydon, Fairfield Halls, 020 8688 9291

- 11 November**, Scarborough Futurist Theatre, 01723 365 789
 - 13 November**, Cardiff, St David's Hall, 029 2087 8444
 - 14 November**, Bradford, St George's Hall, 01274 432 000
 - 16 November**, Bournemouth Pavilion Theatre, 0870 111 3000
 - 17 November**, Brighton, Dome, 01273 709 709
 - 19 November**, Birmingham, Symphony Hall, 0121 780 3333
 - 20 November**, London, Lyceum Theatre, 0870 606 3441
 - 21 November**, Manchester, Bridgewater Hall, 0161 907 9000
 - 23 November**, Harrogate, International Centre, 01423 537 230
- www.elainepaige.com