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Paulo Szot talks opera, musicals and South Pacific

In conversation with PAULO SZOT



Brazilian bass-baritone Paulo Szot has carved out a successful career in the opera world since breaking free of Brazil's somewhat crippled opera scene ten years ago. In 2008, he debuted on the musical theatre stage as the 44-year-old Frenchman Emile de Becque in the Lincoln Center's production of Rodgers & Hammerstein's *South Pacific*. The production ran for two years and Szot won a Tony award. He is currently revisiting the role on a UK tour opposite Samantha Womack. He talks to **Antonia Couling** about maintaining his career across musical genres

ARE YOU REALLY 44?

No I'm 42. When I started the show I was 38. They were really worried about that, because Kelli (O'Hara, who played Nellie in New York) was 35 or something like that, so we were quite close in age. And I said in the opera world we always play old people. I think it's easier to play older than younger. But now I don't have to fake it any more!

WHY DO YOU THINK THE SHOW IS SUCCESSFUL? WHAT ARE PEOPLE RESPONDING TO NOW, SO LONG AFTER IT WAS WRITTEN?

In New York, they waited many years until they had a good cast and a good production and everything, the way the Rodgers & Hammerstein family wanted it to be.

SO THEY HAVE A BIG SAY IN PRODUCTIONS?

Yes they do. So they waited until they had the right moment, the right director and the right theatre. Then they started to cast. I think the key to the success is a combination of all these things. The show got such a good reception from the press and everyone. They were planning to do only six months, but then it ran to a year and then two.

THE THEME OF THE MUSICAL COULD SEEM A BIT DATED, BUT SOMEHOW IT'S NOT.

It's a love story that happens in a certain place at a certain time [during the second world war] in history. It's a story that cannot be completed because of prejudice and racism. One would think that at the beginning they are not together because of the age difference. For Emile de Becque this is the main worry. He does not have a perception that anyone would not want to be with someone because they had a marriage with a black woman in the past. He doesn't even think about it. So first he thinks it's the age difference and then that it's because he has kids. He always wants to be honest.

BUT HE ISN'T ACTUALLY, BECAUSE HE DOESN'T MENTION HIS KIDS.

Yes, but I always want to think that he didn't realise that would be a problem, because he has a great property and a good

situation and he just falls in love with this girl. And everything is resolved in terms of those kids – they have everything they want – servants, people to help. And when he sings 'Some Enchanted Evening' it is an expression of what he is feeling and cannot wait any more to say. Right after that he says, 'I am older than you, but even then I am in a good situation and if we have kids and I die, you can afford to take them back to America if you want.' The other thing that speaks for his honesty is that he also wants her to know that he had to leave his country because he killed a man and people were glad he killed this man – it was not a

the operatic voice makes this difference bigger, between his world and theirs – and somehow they meet in the middle.

IF YOU DIDN'T HAVE RESERVATIONS BEFORE YOU TOOK THE ROLE, DID THAT CHANGE?

It was very difficult. During the rehearsal process too, because in theatre, they rehearse many, many hours. It was very difficult to adjust, but I did.

DID THAT DIFFERENT PROCESS IN THEATRE CONTRIBUTE TO YOUR WORK IN OPERA?

Yes, it contributed to me as an artist, in the way that I now approach other jobs or roles.

“The show got such a good reception from the press and everyone. They were planning to do only six months, but then it ran to a year and then two”

bad thing. He is completely honest, so the fact that he didn't mention the kids shows that he doesn't think it would be a problem. They come from such different cultures – for her, being married with a person who had married a black woman before would be the end of the world – but he just doesn't get it.

DID YOU HAVE ANY RESERVATIONS ABOUT TAKING THE ROLE?

Not at all, but people around me did! Everyone was like, 'It's musical theatre, not opera, its eight shows a week, it will be very dangerous for you'. But I wanted to try something new and I was always in love with musicals. This was just a perfect opportunity – a role written for an opera singer, the Lincoln Center which would mean a great quality of production and a great director, and why not?

THE FACT THAT THE SHOW HAS AN OPERA SINGER IN IT SEEMS TO ADD SO MUCH TO ITS STATURE AS A PIECE.

It adds so much to the role because it makes him very different. He's French, he's on an island and surrounded by people in the navy, but very different from the other people. And

Because for opera singers, you have to be musically perfect. You arrive in a place and often only have a very short amount of time to rehearse so you have sing well and to know what you are doing. In the theatre, you have to arrive like a white piece of paper and accept everything that is coming from the others, from the director and to destroy yourself. You have to come open and ready to go right down to the floor so that you can build it up again.

WAS IT THE FIRST TIME YOU HAD DONE THAT?

Yes – going right to the edge and finding the essence – it was great.

IN OPERA, RESEARCH TENDS TO RELY MORE ON PREVIOUS SINGERS' INTERPRETATIONS.

Well the expression is the voice, and you have to respect that. That's the vehicle of communication. It should carry all the emotions. And here it was completely different, because you had to create your own music in the dialogues, to create your own vocal score. And that was magical – to feel free and at the same time so responsible for what you are doing. Once the song ends you are alone

and you have to create the scene and there is no help – no conductor, no underscoring, just you.

AND HOW CAN YOU NOW TAKE THAT TO OPERA?

When you learn something it becomes part of you. It's not exactly technique, but it's something inside of you from now on. All of a sudden, you see things in a different way, so all this information about how to approach differently makes you, I believe, a better artist.

BUT AT THE SAME TIME IT MUST BE FRUSTRATING BECAUSE YOU MIGHT BE BRINGING ALL THAT TO YOUR WORK, WHILE THE OTHER OPERA SINGERS MIGHT NOT BE.

Again, you have to adjust. It is either opera or it is theatre. They are very close, but they are not the same. And what people expect is different too. So in opera, people want your voice to be perfect all the time and in musical theatre they want your expression. Even if you crack a note, if that crack expresses something emotional they will buy it and they will love it.

The problem comes when you go from an experience like I had in *South Pacific* and then go to another one and expect it to be the same. Then you get very frustrated.

They are not the same and you just have to accept that. But all things have positive points too. In opera you don't have eight shows a week, so you have rest, while in musicals you have no life; you work all week, just one day off, two shows a day on two days. You just live for the work.

HOW DO YOU COPE VOCALLY WITH EIGHT SHOWS A WEEK?

You have to be really careful. I try to be quiet. Silence, a good diet and exercise. You focus on vocal health. It's not two hours of singing, but you still have to sound fresh and beautiful and your voice has to be nice for people to hear all these songs that they are expecting you to sing.

WHEN YOU GOT THE TONY, WAS IT A SURPRISE?

I was just focused on trying to do a good job. The reviews were good but I didn't tend to take much notice and then the Tony nomination came and I said, 'Well this is ridiculous!' And Liza Minnelli came on stage (to present the award) and then it happened.

And it changes everything in your life. You think 'Wow! I really did a good job!' So you can relax a little because you don't have to think all the time, 'I have to be great. I have

to be great.' But on the other side it doubles people's expectations of you.

WHAT WAS THE OPERA WORLD'S REACTION TO YOU BEING IN A MUSICAL?

South Pacific opened so many opera doors to me that I was trying to get through before and couldn't. Everyone was surprised – all my agents were surprised. They thought it would be the opposite. When I chose to do it, I was just thinking about me as an artist, to develop myself. But then all these good consequences came along – Peter Gelb (general manager of the Met) came along to the show and then wanted to talk about doing *The Nose*. They tried me out in the house and then it happened. And after that came many more contracts with the company.

“*South Pacific* opened so many opera doors to me that I was trying to get through before and couldn't

IT SHOWS HOW WELL THE PART OF EMILE IS WRITTEN – HOW WELL IT DISPLAYS THE OPERATIC VOICE. THEY COULD HAVE HELD IT BACK TO BE MORE MUSICAL THEATRE.

I think it's also a choice of what you want to do. As part of the process of developing it in New York, there was a point where they wanted to hold it back a little bit and it didn't quite work. So I decided I really want to go for it, I didn't want to hold it back. And it worked.

PARTICULARLY WITH 'THIS NEARLY WAS MINE' – IF YOU HELD THAT BACK IT WOULD BE WEAK, BUT IT'S ACTUALLY THE CRUX FOR EMILE'S CHARACTER.

This is interesting because the most known song when it first opened was 'Some Enchanted Evening'. 'This Nearly Was Mine' was not a big thing. But I always believed that that song had so much potential in it. It was a moment when he was very vulnerable and he was showing that his world was totally lost and desperate. And I wanted to invest in that song as much as I could – to give all the emotions and layers and colours. And it became the big hit from this production. It's my favourite song. ●

South Pacific is on tour in the UK until 31 March 2012. Paulo Szot is sharing the role with Jason Howard.

www.southpacificonstage.com
www.pauloszot.com



Paulo Szot as Emile, and on page 6 with Samantha Womack