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FOLLIES

London 1987

'The thought
of you stays bright'

**The
Stephen Sondheim
Society**

music that Sondheim wrote for *Follies*, describing it as “pastiche as an act of homage rather than parody” and establishing the approach he would take for the rest of the songs in the show. Like Adele Leigh, Michelle has gone on to become a successful “crossover” artist, just as comfortable on stage in musicals as she is on the concert platform performing arias and oratorios. A native of Sutton-in-Ashfield, Nottinghamshire, she now lives in Canada and spends much of her time crisscrossing the globe as an international soprano and teacher – and giving multiple meaning to the term “crossover star”.

During an extended visit to the UK in the summer of 2011, Michelle was a guest at the Stephen Sondheim Society Garden Party, where she agreed to share her memories of the show’s West End premiere for the Society’s magazine. A month or so later, I find myself running late for our lunch at a gastropub near her West London home. I finally arrive, dripping wet from the torrential rain, to find her already enjoying a small glass of beer by the fireplace. She’s easy to spot – she radiates with a youthful glow, and hasn’t aged from the photos I’ve seen of the 1987 production. As if to prove it, she starts by opening a stiffened manila envelope and producing a faded colour snapshot of her and Julia McKenzie, who headlined along with Diana Rigg (as Sally and Phyllis respectively). Taken in a dressing room during the show’s run, the print hasn’t aged nearly as well as its subjects – perhaps accounting for the soprano’s apparent Dorian Gray-like defiance of the aging process. “My mother kept the original tacked to a board, and it was so faded and full of pinholes. I took it for restoration and the man who did it for me got so excited. ‘It’s her, it’s her... Miss Marple!’” Looking at the snaps appears to trigger a Proustian rush of remembrance for Michelle. With her entire body, she immerses herself in the fond memories she clearly has for the show, closing her eyes and drinking in the experiences as they reform in her mind. It’s a very *Follies* moment.

“Often, during in the curtain call, I’d stand there and think, ‘I cannot believe that I’m on stage with these people, from Hollywood stars to TV stars.’ There’s Diana, Julia – *the* Sondheim performer – and Adele, a well-known opera singer, Pearl Carr [as Billie Whitman], Teddy Johnson [Wally Whitman]... Any question you’d have, from any genre of performing, could be answered by somebody on that stage.”

MICHELLE TODD

One More Glimpse of the Past

In 1987, Michelle Todd played the role of the young Heidi Schiller in the original London production of *Follies*. I’m too young to have seen the show but it was, by all accounts, a lavish affair, filling the Shaftesbury Theatre in the West End eight times a week for an incredible 644 performances – to date, the longest run the show has ever had. (It would be 15 years before another major London production.)

Michelle had the joy of sharing the stage, and a duet, with the (then retired) lyric soprano Adele Leigh (1928–2004), and their song, “One More Kiss”, while not particularly central to the plot, represents the most poignant and reflective moment in the show. It was also the first piece of

Michelle auditioned for the role of Young Heidi while performing at the Leeds Playhouse in *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Pravda*, but was not optimistic about her chances. In fact, she was so sure she'd not won the part that she even packed her bags and emigrated. "I moved to Canada to get engaged," she laughed. "I was planning my wedding, which was going to be that year, when I got the phone call from my agent saying that they're offering me the role of Young Heidi for a year." Her fiancé – now her husband, a cinematographer – agreed to postpone the nuptials for 12 months and Michelle flew back home to begin rehearsals.

"It was like winning the Lotto for me," she bubbled. "I'd no idea if I was first choice or not, but I couldn't've cared less, I was just so thrilled! Everybody was so friendly. I especially remember Julia and Diana introducing themselves to everybody, and it really was a very special time."



She also recalled working with Sondheim on her duet. "As a young performer, I was absolutely terrified! Most of the young performers would say that he seemed very supportive... and very knowledgeable, and that's always terrifying to young performers. You realise when you're with someone who's such an expert how little you know. But of course it was thrilling even spending just 10 minutes listening to him. You could only learn, learn, learn from people like him."

Another inspirational figure for Todd was producer Cameron Mackintosh, who the year prior to *Follies* had enjoyed almost supernatural success with the opening of Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*. "Can you imagine the expense of shows like these?" Michelle asks. "And *Follies* had so many high calibre performers! I should imagine that it's quite a scary prospect for any producer. God bless Cameron Mackintosh! God bless that man!" Mackintosh (now Sir Cameron, of course) had taken something of a risk, I remind her, as the

US reception to *Follies* was initially mixed. The Broadway critic Frank Rich famously claimed that audiences were left "baffled and restless", so did the revisions and additions for the original London production garner a better response? "Well, the houses were very good," she recalls, "and everybody that I knew who came to see it loved it. I can't remember the reviews, but I think it was a critical success. It ran for so long..."

The London *Follies* introduced audiences to new material written specially for the production – namely "Country House", "Make the Most of Your Music", "Ah But Underneath" and a new version of "Loveland", which was re-written ("for reasons I've forgotten", according to the composer). As a young performer, Michelle was in awe of not only Sondheim, who was at the top of his game and writing new material daily, but also Diana Rigg and Daniel Massey, who had to cope with the mouthful that is "Country House" – "a killer of a song," as she politely puts it.

As a Mackintosh-backed show, *Follies* was characteristically lavish, adding an exciting dimension to the performances. "The sets [by Maria Björnson] were jaw-dropping," Michelle recalls, "and we all had these huge costumes, and wigs and hats." Negotiating such extravagant costumes posed its own set of challenges. "I had to rehearse at home singing with things on my head so I could get used to the weight! I tell you, it's easy – well, easier – to sing it in the rehearsal room in your comfy clothes. But then you suddenly get the costume and the wigs *and* the hats *and* the make-up...! We had special make-up lessons to apply the white make-up and black eyeshadow. Then all the quick changes.... But it's so worth it. Always *all* worth it. I don't think anybody involved would've wanted to be anywhere else."

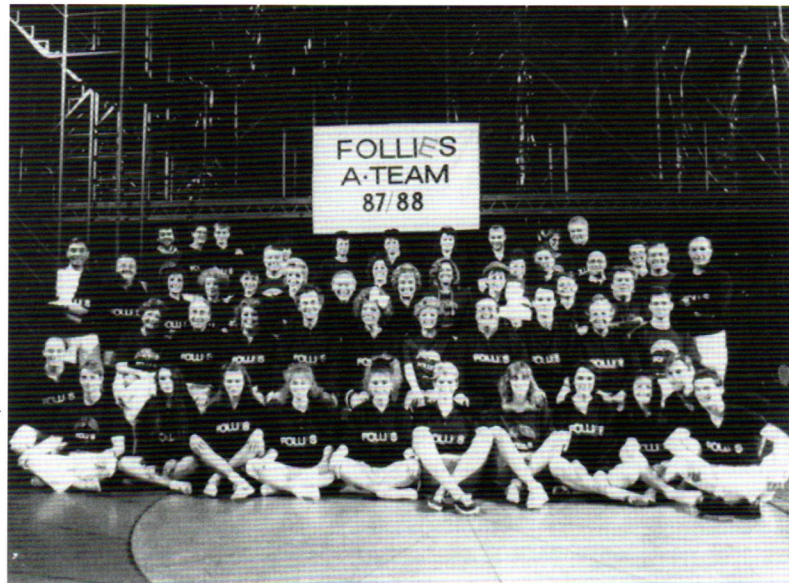
Our waiter buzzes by and lets us know that our food is on its way. Michelle takes this as her cue to sit up and ask, almost impatiently: "You want a good *Follies* anecdote? I've got one for you." She's clearly been itching to share this since I sat down. "I think I may be the only person to have ever sung that duet as a solo in a performance of the show." After a beat – her singer's sense of timing is clearly impeccable – Michelle goes on to explain that, during the final sing-through of the show, everyone was gathered in the rehearsal room – "the producers, Stephen Sondheim... everybody!" – all apart from Adele Leigh, that is, who had gone AWOL. To keep things ticking along, conductor Martin Koch asked the young Todd to cover both

parts of “One More Kiss” – a request that was to prove prescient.

“Fast forward nine months into the show,” she continues with impish glee. “At approximately 10 to 10 every night, I’d be going up the steps to the bridge to sing “One More Kiss”. At that point, there was usually no one else in the wings, just myself and Adele Leigh waiting to go on. Diana and Julia would be frozen on stage, and Adele was to walk out in between them and start singing, and the ghost – me – would come in up above. Just as I’m going up the steps, I turn round and... Adele faints! There was no time to get her understudy. I stood there and I remember I said to the stage manager, ‘Just tell the spotlight to follow me,’ and of course I just walked on and did Adele’s bit on the stage!” She giggles as the story continues. “I remember walking past Diana, who went ‘oooh!’. And Martin Koch looked up and saw me and I can remember his face, looking very puzzled. So I just sang both parts, walked about the stage a little bit and then walked off.” Todd was met in the wings by her fellow performers, who had apparently rushed from their dressing rooms to see what was going on. “I don’t know if I’d’ve had the absolute focus to have done this if I’d not already done it in rehearsal. I’m sure the audience had no idea of who I was or what was happening!” At this point, our food arrives – for me, a blue-cheese tart, for Michelle a sweet potato, coconut and coriander soup. “No bread, please!” she chimes, adding, “You have to be careful about what you eat; things like dairy food and chocolate, things like that, can clog the mechanism a bit,” she explains, making the first of numerous mentions of the mechanics of the singing voice. “You also need to keep the vocal folds very well lubricated, as they’re so susceptible to dryness and tiredness.” She sips her beer, keen to point out that it doesn’t matter so much what you drink. “It’s actually steam that’s best for the vocal folds. Steam gets through to the folds... The first thing I often do in a hotel, if it’s in a dry environment, is turn the taps on in the bathroom and get the room nice and steamy.”

Listening to Michelle, I can imagine how successful she must be as a teacher. Her voice is

soft and warm, but crystal clear, with just a delicate hint of her Midlands accent. For her, like Sondheim, teaching is the noblest of arts, and she clearly relishes the chance to pass on knowledge. “I love teaching and masterclassing. It’s so exciting to see a student suddenly popping up, either in a West End show or sometimes in an opera or on a recording. I work a lot with the National Association of Teachers of Singing, and I’ve also done work with the Voice Care Foundation, which helps young singers – pop singers, musical theatre singers and so on – with their voice. Young voices can get into trouble, especially considering the repertoire and singing eight shows a week.” So what did she think of the Academy singers at the Garden Party? “There were just... wonderful. That was exciting to see... The only thing about young singers that worries me is, with cutbacks and repertoires disappearing, where are these people going to perform? But that was a concern in my day, when I started out.”



With all this reminiscing, one could forgive an actress for living in the past, but Todd continues to be a hardworking and busy performer with an international singing schedule to contend with. As the interview

draws to a close, I ask her what advice she’d give to her younger self if they could meet, perchance to duet. After a long, thought-filled pause, she whispers, “Just to treasure every minute that you’re on stage. Every minute that you get the privilege to be on stage, performing to people, just treasure it. It’s a privilege to perform to people.” It’s the kind of non-effacing response I’d come to expect from the soft-spoken soprano.

As we part, Todd shares her final thoughts on *Follies*. “Every single one of the performers I worked with on *Follies* taught me something, and I’m incredibly grateful for being invited to be a tiny part of it. It was important in my life. If you’re going to put your life on hold, I can’t think of a better reason than singing in *Follies*.”

Craig Glenday