

A STAR IS BORN - an extract from Michael Crawford's Autobiography. Part One.

I .

Because I'd had some musical training, I was automatically put into the choir at Oakfield Upper School. I was terribly nervous, but whenever I sang in the chapel, I felt truly special because I knew I was finally doing something well.

It was Mr Passey who saw I could also act. He gave me the chance to prove it in our school production of Benjamin Britten's LET'S MAKE AN OPERA. It was only after I stepped on stage that first night that both he and I found out what I was about as an actor. I heard laughter for the first time; and my love affair with it began at that instant.

The second half of LET'S MAKE AN OPERA is a rather dark and Dickensian tale, telling the story of one of the children who were forced by sweeps in Victorian England to climb up and clean the narrow chimney passages. It was grim work and most of the children died at a tender age, their lungs congested and diseased with soot.

I was Sam, the young sweep boy and the opera's hero, who is rescued from his terrible fate, brought into a loving home, and turned into a gentleman. In the first scene of the opera, little Sammy is pushed out on the stage while everyone sings, 'Up the chimney you go...'

In response Sam pleads, 'Please don't send me up again! Please don't send me up again...' and the company keeps singing, pushing their brushes, 'Up the chimney, up you go ... !'

After the first verse, the two villainous sweeps (played with relish by Mr Livingstone, the headmaster, and Mr Anderson, our French master), come along and rip off poor little Sammy's shirt. At the end of the second verse they rip off his raggedy pants and he is left standing in his tattered shorts, a miserable tyke with soot all over his pathetic frame. Then they push the poor boy up the chimney.

On opening night, the hall was filled to capacity with parents, teachers and pupils; Mum and Den were in the audience, and Nan was as well.

Behind the curtains I was manic with stage fright. (Nothing much has changed on that score). At last the moment came, the curtains opened and the opera began: 'Up the chimney, up you go!' They ripped my shirt off. 'Up the chimney, up you go!' But this time I grabbed my trousers and absolutely refused to let go. Little Sammy stood firm, grasping his drawers with an iron grip. Mr Livingstone was convinced I was over acting, and decided to take matters into his own hands.

'Ah-ha,' he adlibbed, lunging across the stage at me. 'Little Sam doesn't want to go up the chimney!'

Then he cuffed me on the head and pulled off my tattered trousers. There was nothing on underneath, not a stitch. I was so nervous beforehand, I had simply forgotten to put on my shorts.

I stood there, stark naked, in full view of the audience and the Mayor, surrounded by chaos. Apparently my poor mother began chain-smoking again on the spot, there was anarchy in the stalls, as the pupils started cheering, the girls whistled and pennies were thrown onto the stage. Mr Livingstone was livid of course, and using his bare hands he pulled the curtains across on the performance. The noise from the audience died down, and for the next few minutes, the only audible sound in Brixton Town Hall signified that the mother of all beatings was being administered to my backside.

The curtains parted once more. I stood centre-stage, dressed in a hastily borrowed pair of trousers that covered my bright-red rear end. It felt like heavily peppered steak tartar. I heard my cue: 'Up the chimney, up you go!' They didn't have to sing it twice. I went up the chimney as if I had been shot from a cannon.

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Part

By all that's right, my acting career should have ended the evening I forgot to put on a pair of shorts, and appeared naked before the Mayor and burghers of Brixton. It should have ended, had it not been for a guardian angel in the rather improbable guise of our next-door neighbour in Herne Hill. Mrs Gray was our neighbour on Winterbrook Road, one of those kindly people with an instinct for gaining a child's respect.

She happened to see the notice in the TELEGRAPH that the English Opera Group was looking for boy sopranos to play in a production of Benjamin Britten's THE TURN OF THE SCREW She must have heard me practising through the walls, because she urged my mother to let me have a go. So I went along to join the hundreds of other children who auditioned.

But the pure terror of stage fright overtook me at that last audition and my voice left me completely. I couldn't sing a note. David Hemmings won the role, which marked his debut as a performer. But the English Opera Group remembered my audition, and a few months later they contacted my mother about my availability for their production of LET'S MAKE AN OPERA which starred Trevor Anthony.

This time I managed to get through the last big audition at Benjamin Britten's home in Regent's Park. Malcolm Arnold played the piano and Norman Del Mar stood by, murmuring, 'Ah, yes, yes, very good,' while he conducted.

I got the part. I still have the letter that says they've chosen me as 'Sammy 2' in THE LITTLE SWEEP (David Hemmings was 'Sammy 1'; he played the role on the opening night, and then we alternated every other performance.) I was to be paid eight pounds per week. Fantastic! I must say something here about Benjamin Britten - indeed, I cannot say enough about the kindness of that great man. I was twelve when I met him, and he was at the time by far the poshest person I'd ever seen. From the very start he showed me enormous consideration and tolerance. I remember an incident when, in the midst of the studio recording of LET'S MAKE AN OPERA, the engineers began to pick up a crunching sound on one of the mikes. Everything stopped until the technicians could figure out what it was or where it was coming from. An engineer finally discovered the source of the problem off in a corner - me cracking chestnuts. As I wasn't singing I thought it was perfectly all right to eat, not realising it was all being picked up on the studio microphones. Mr Britten never scolded - the humiliation alone was enough to make me never do it again.

Having had a taste of life on the stage, I was absolutely miserable about returning to my former life. I started to press Mum and Den to let me leave school. I had never dreamed of becoming an actor - it was almost as if the profession had chosen me. One job always seemed

to lead to another, and by the time I was fourteen, I was working steadily. I even found an agent during the OPERA tour. It was he who decided that I needed to change my name.

One afternoon, while walking down Sheerness High Street I saw a large biscuit lorry with an enormous sign along the side, reading 'CRAWFORD'S Biscuits are Best.' I don't know why, but the name jumped out at me. 'Michael Crawford'. I liked the sound of it. Mum and Den finally gave in to all my arguments. I know they were disappointed, but they must have realised it was senseless to throw their money away on schooling I hated. So I was allowed to leave school at fifteen, when I was legally able to do so.

Shortly thereafter, when I was still fifteen (looking all of twelve), I did two films. One was BLOW YOUR OWN TRUMPET, in which I got my first screen kiss (from a dog); in the other, SOAP BOX DERBY, I experienced the thrill of performing my first stunt work. The thrill of it, the love of it, made it easy to bring a real drive and intensity to everything I did. The work has never been a hardship - it's doing what I love to do. SOAP BOX DERBY had its world premiere at the Savoy Cinema, York Road, Wandsworth on Saturday, January 4th, 1958, at 10.45 am - by invitation only.

I was in the big time_