

David, Kimberly, Boris and Petsy: it's showtime

Ginny Dougary, who wrote the lyrics for *David Blunkett: The Musical*, reveals how the show was inspired and explains why the real-life characters are perfect for the stage



THE life of the musical began, in a curious way, last summer before the news about any of the key players had even broken. I had gone to the Bloomsbury office of *The Spectator* to interview Boris Johnson, who was attempting to publicise his debut novel, *Seventy-Two Virgins*.

The date was Tuesday, August 10. On Sunday, August 15, the *News of the World* splashed with its story about the Home Secretary's long-term affair with a married woman who was revealed in *The Sun* the following day to be Kimberly Fortier.

Boris was late for our interview and so I hung around the stairwell, as various women of a certain age walked past. One or two had the whiff of breeding and resigned melancholia that made me think of a heroine in an Anita Brookner or Barbara Pym novel. And then Kimberly appeared, bright-eyed and as bouncy as a puppy. We spoke for a few minutes, during which she managed to name-drop several times: "Have you met my husband?" "Do you know Lord and Lady..."

When Boris appeared on his bicycle, soaked from a rainstorm, Kimberly hovered — encouraged by my interviewee — and her manner became even more hectic. Out of the blue, she mentioned Boris's wife: "Yes! Yes! Yes! He's got a terrific wife! She's the best!" For his part, Boris sighed and mumbled and tugged his wet, yellow hair and complained that he was finding the whole experience of being interviewed "harrowing".

The hero of his novel is a shambling, bumbling, bicycle-riding Tory MP who is worried that his extramarital affair is about to be exposed by a tabloid newspaper. "He's not me, by the way," Boris made clear, then added: "but you've got to use what you know, haven't you?"

Specie columnist Rod Liddle's affair had already broken and his estranged wife, Rachel Royce, had referred (writing in the *Daily Mail*, with a swift retort from him in *The Sunday Times*) to the frisky atmosphere at *The Spectator* — soon to be dubbed, as the extramarital shenanigans multiplied, *The Sextator*.

I had asked Boris if he felt that as editor, he was responsible for creating the ethos of his office. "You mean, am I presiding over a bordello? Certainly not!" he exclaimed, giggling

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Clockwise from left: Mark Perry and Lynne Davies during rehearsals; Petronella Wyatt and Zigi Ellison, who plays her; and Davies, who plays Kimberly Fortier

hugely. The strangest part of the interview — spookily prescient, given that I had absolutely no idea what was unfolding behind the scenes — was this question: "Would you have any qualms about printing a story about a senior Labour politician's liaison?" "Got a good one?" Boris asked. And "I tell you what. There's only one way to settle this moral issue. Bring me the story and I'll scour my conscience."

As I said, I didn't have that story to bring Boris (it turned out that he

had one of his own). But in the months to come I found myself gripped by the Blunkett-Fortier saga — and, to a lesser extent, by the disclosures about Boris and his columnist, Petronella Wyatt.

All four characters are consummate media operators and political players. Just as the Prince and Princess of Wales had manipulated their contacts to gain sympathy — who were, of course, only too happy to oblige — so did our newspapers see-

publisher I had met at *The Spectator* — with her breathless voice and cheerleader manner — was being portrayed as a femme fatale. From the newspaper stories, as more and more lovers crowded into her boudoir, she became a fantastical creature from another era. I saw her as Violetta in the opening scene of *La Traviata*, a gorgeous salon courtesan in a scarlet ballgown, fluttering her fan, captivating all the male guests at the party, her come-hither manner promising

them everything. Blunkett, who had never particularly interested me before, became Alceste — the anti-hero of Molière's 17th-century play *The Misanthropist*. He rails against the shallowness and frippery of the age but the woman he is besotted by — the young, flirty, faithless Celimene — embodies everything he detests. As he tells his one loyal friend, Philinte: "La raison n'est pas ce qui règle l'amour" (it's not reason which governs love).

Once Boris had been snapped jogging in that skull-and-crossbones beanie and long baggy camouflage shorts, it became obvious what to do with him. He had moaned in our interview about the straitjacket of his shambling, bumbling bicycle-riding persona. Clearly behind that P. G. Wodehouse façade there was an urban rapper bursting to break free. So in our musical there is the ultimate tribute to the man we call The Sultan of The Sextator — The Boris Rap. Yo!

As for Petronella... what a joy! The more I read about her, the more perfect she was for our musical. She has posed for the *Tatler* in satin babydolls and ostrich-feather mules. She loves to sing Cole Porter and her party trick, which she performed for Norman Lamont's birthday, is singing *Lili Marlene* in the husky tones of Marlene Dietrich. She has apparently serenaded Boris with arias from *La Bohème*. She's a daddy's girl — her father was Woodrow, the late Lord Wyatt of Weeford (doesn't that trip off the tongue nicely?) — who lives at home with her mother, Verushka. And she's obligingly indiscreet.

It is down to Petsy, as she is called by her friends, that we know about Kimberly's "extraordinarily flirtatious banter" at the dinner where Blunkett and Fortier met, accompanied by Boris and Petronella. Ostensibly reviewing Stephen Pollard's biography of Blunkett, she informed us that "Mr Blunkett and I ate Dover sole. Ms Fortier ate Mr Blunkett". And this is where we learnt that Kimberly had informed the new Home Secretary that she had "always wanted to know what it was like to sleep with a blind man".

More outrageous lines followed. Blunkett's gift to the headline writers, "The Socialist and the Socialite", was one of the best, and it dawned on me that this *dramatis personae* were calling out for a stage of their own, to express themselves in song. More extraordinarily, I never having written a song before in my life, would be the one to make it happen. A couple of weeks before Christmas, a composer friend by the stage-name of MJ (short for Mary Jo) started to bash out some lyrics and melodies. Our first number was Blunkett's theme song. Handily,

Blunkett became Alceste, the anti-hero of Molière's play *The Misanthropist*

saw between the various combatants.

The developments had all the makings of an epic drama. Commentators compared Blunkett's downfall to a Greek tragedy; Shakespearean analogies proliferated. Here was a man who had overcome so many obstacles, driven by the steel of his will to succeed, toppled near the pinnacle of his world by that which makes him most human: love. But there was also something uniquely modern about it, too. A politician — or any man in high public office, for that matter — who risks his career by insisting that a child out of wedlock is his and he wants to see him? Unheard of. Yet it does seem strangely contemporary, chiming in with the protests of Fathers 4 Justice. And there's something both ancient and modern about a woman who uses her own power and influence to destroy one of the most powerful men in the country.

It began to intrigue me that the



NIGEL HOWARD



Clockwise from left: Boris Johnson, Kimberly Fortie and David Blunkett at a Spectator party last year; Mark Perry, who plays Blunkett; MJ, who wrote the music; and Robert Bathurst, who plays Boris Johnson



she had written the tune only a few weeks earlier, while on a songwriting master class in Yorkshire under the tutelage of Ray Davies of the Kinks fame. That was for *Cinderella: The Panto* but the robust, catchy opening, which moves into a poignant lament before its bracing return, worked brilliantly for Blunkett's story.

Left to our own devices, who knows how long it would have taken us to write the whole musical? But on the evening before Christmas Eve, my 17-year-old son, Tom, read out a paragraph in *The Week* about a producer, Martin Witts, who was planning to put on a David Blunkett musical and this news galvanised me into action.

The slightly surreal atmosphere that has attached itself to much of the making of this musical began with my initial phone calls to track down Witts. I spoke to Nigel Reynolds, an old mate who had written the original diary item in *The Daily Telegraph*. He was sitting in a car park in the dark in Devon and was about to go canoeing. And so it went on, each phone call

more bizarre than the last, until I finally found Witts — driving down a country lane in Yorkshire — who agreed to meet MJ and me in the new year in Soho, where we would play him our songs.

Over Christmas, MJ — who was at home with her family in the US — and I e-mailed each other lyrics and ideas and the opening of *Kimberly's Song* (Blunkett's companion piece) was written on her laptop on the composer's return flight to London.

Around the time of our first meeting, I picked up T2 to read Richard Morrison under the headline "Don't just read this column... turn it into a musical". Well "Where are the new Lloyd Webbers?" he asked. "And who will give them the chance to show what they can do, when staging even a small West End musical can easily leave a producer sadder and wiser to the tune of several hundred thousand quid?" (I hoped Martin Witts was not a *Times* reader.)

Morrison was publicising a Greenwich Theatre initiative to encourage new composers and lyricists to submit works from newspaper stories... "The fact is that a huge number of masterpieces — musical, literary and cinematic — have started life as headlines ripped from the morning papers," he wrote, and listed *Porgy and Bess*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Blood Wedding* and *Anna Karenina*, just for starters.

In the weeks to come, these illustrious antecedents proved a useful rebuttal to the accusation that there is something intrinsically suspect about basing an artistic endeavour on a news story.

Martin turned up for our first meeting almost an hour late — an in-

auspicious start (his train from York was delayed). It never happened again. The three of us hit it off immediately, but the promised piano was not available, and Leo Alexander of Kettners was persuaded to let us use his baby grand in the private rooms upstairs. Two good-looking boys — I assumed they were Leo's nephews — asked if they could listen in. Martin whispered in my ear "That's Simon Anstell from *cd:UK*." Now I see his impish features on the television all the time.

There were gratifying grins when MJ finished singing and, most importantly, Martin was persuaded by the two songs that we could pull it off. We were on! And, almost immediately, rather like the Blunkett story itself, the musical began to take on a life force of its own.

We would stay in a pub and try out some of our songs on the clientèle of ex-miners



The so-called preview in *The Grey Horse* pub in Elvington, Yorkshire, was a case in point. The original thinking behind this was that it would be a good idea if the London writer and the American composer visited Sheffield to get a bit of a feel for Blunkett's northern origins. We would drive around the estate where he grew up and his Brightside constituency and this would illuminate our script and songs. As part of the Yorkshire experience, we would stay in Martin's friend Dave's pub and try out some of our songs on his clientèle of ex-miners. A reporter from the *Yorkshire Post* might come along; possibly someone from the local radio station. Nothing we couldn't handle.

At this point, I should say that Martin has impeccable showman credentials — he produced last year's award-winning show *Hurricane* (about Alex "Hurricane" Higgins), and the musical of *Prisoner: Cell Block H* (with Lily Savage); he was the promoter for B. B. King and Nina Simone, and stage manager at Glynedebourne. But I think it is fair to say that he was unprepared for "the world's media" — as *The Guardian* put it — arriving en masse in Elvington.

They started turning up shortly after breakfast. So many television crews; so much equipment. Press agencies. *Newsnight*. Ridiculous numbers of photographers with more equipment. The Sky presenter seems as bemused as us that her bosses insist that she keep on filming, when she clearly wants to wrap it up and go home. An independent crew film us being filmed by Sky. I cannot get the hang of someone talking in my ear and feel myself pulling unattractive



faces in response to the rather haranguing tone of the interviewer. My eye-rolling and muttering and Martin's bossy admonishments are all caught by the independent mob, as well as our phoney smiles when we go back on air.

I just want to hang with the guys from *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* but keep having to pose for photographs — which is one of my least favourite activities. The locals are pretty bemused by all this activity, much to the delight of my fellow hacks. John, an old chap, complains about the loudness of MJ's singing voice, and then threatens to show me his hernia scar but instead pulls out an enchanting sepia photograph of his wife when they were courting. One of the photographers chalks up a blackboard with a *Blunkett: The Musical* preview sign and places it in front of the pub. All his colleagues are delighted that someone has had the wit to produce a bona fide photo opportunity.

By 8pm, I have completely had it. It is interesting seeing what my press

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