

Self

ROBERT CRAMPTON
TAKES IT FROM THE TOP,
A FAMILY WITH A KILLER
IN ITS GENES,
JOHN AMAECHI'S
FITNESS REGIME
AND **MISS ABIGAIL'S**
TIME WARP ADVICE

Robert Crampton's age of enlightenment



MY FIRST PROPER SINGING lesson! (The catastrophe with the Autotune machine doesn't count.) My teacher is Mary Jo Paranzino, an American. Mary Jo lives in Brighton, which is a long way to go, but it does a man good to lift his eyes from east London and west Hull once in a while. Mary Jo said I'd need at least three lessons. She said that before she'd heard me sing – my guess is I'll be making that trip south a fair bit this winter. Local people with couch-based paths to personal happiness – from what I've heard about Brighton, there won't be any shortage – might like to get in touch. The idea of doubling up on treatments appeals to me. I run a tight ship here.

"So, you saw this guy with a voice box machine?" said Mary Jo. Yes, I said, and he said I was so bad that even his advanced technology couldn't help me. "Lemme tell ya," she said, "everybody can sing. Not everybody can sing like Pavarotti, but that's not the point." I settled back happily, warming up for the sort of idle chit-chat that I have grown to rely on to defer whatever ritual humiliation I'm about to undergo. But a funny thing happened. Before I could say anything fatuous and discursive, Mary Jo, in that candid, high-productivity, only-two-

weeks-holiday-a-year American way, started the singing lesson.

"OK," she said, moving ominously behind a small keyboard, "the first thing we're gonna do is breathing." I was shocked. It was as if on the first day of a school year the teacher had actually taught you something, rather than banging on about timetables and the syllabus until the bell went. Mary Jo has only been here a few weeks: clearly, she has much to learn about the native arts of prevarication, displacement and running down the clock.

Twenty minutes later I was happier. We'd raced through breathing ("imagine you got an inner toob around your middle") and the importance of opening your mouth (sounds obvious, but I am a very ignorant, very self-conscious novice). Mary Jo had gone up and down her keyboard while I made yah-ah-a noises, some of which had sounded like the notes she was playing. She had told me I could sing. I'd just never done it. "Like I'm driving on the left, I'm hittin' the kerbstone and turning on the windshield wipers." And she had just told me I am a baritone, so I was feeling pretty damn *hombre* about that. Then she said: "OK, now we're gonna sing."

Excuse me? I said. "We're gonna sing," she repeated,

handing me some sheet music. "This is from *Les Mis*," and off, in her beautiful voice, she went. "On my own, pretending he's beside me, all alone..." When my turn came, I instantly murdered this melody, a melody which has given pleasure to millions, and then spent 15 minutes mutilating its corpse. Then things got much worse. Mary Jo handed me another sheet. "Time for a little rock and blues," she said. "This is called *Kansas City*. And it goes. Like. This..."

As she sang, I studied the lyrics, face already flushing, utter misery descending. "I'm goin' to KANSAS CIT-Y; KANSAS CIT-Y, Here I come. I'm goin' to KANSAS CIT-Y;

I murdered this melody, and then spent 15 minutes mutilating its corpse

KANSAS CIT-Y, Here I come. They got a cra-zy way of lov-in' there and I'm gonna get me some." (I cringe even to write these words down.) Mary Jo sang on: "I'm goin' to pack my clothes, Leave at the crack of dawn. My old lad-y will be sleep-in' and she won't know where I've gone." Etc.

"OK," said Mary Jo. "Jump in and see what happens." What happened was I mumbled along, mortified, sounding like someone singing through a very thick, very fluffy bath towel. "Are you all right?" asked Mary Jo. Water, I said, running to the lavatory.

In the lavatory, I looked in the mirror, and did something I don't

often do: I decided to confront an issue, right there, right then. I'm really bad at doing that, so what I did next was a small victory over the large part of me that dodges difficulty. Mary Jo, I said, coming back in to the main room. "Uh-huh?" she said, looking up from her keyboard. I'm sorry, I said, but I've got a problem with *Kansas City*. "Yeah?" she said. The thing is, I said, I'm not American, I haven't got an American accent, I'm not going to KANSAS CIT-Y, I've got no intention of going to KANSAS CIT-Y, for some crazy lovin' or otherwise. And even if I did go to KANSAS CIT-Y, there's no way I'd leave in the middle of the night without telling my wife where I was going, and leaving a phone number and all that. I feel ridiculous singing stuff like this. Embarrassed. Fake.

"What if we changed it to CANTER BUR-Y?" she said. No, I said sadly, it won't work. I'm even less likely to go to southeast Kent for some crazy lovin' than I am the American Midwest.

"Kensington?" she suggested. It's not so much the place names, Mary Jo, I said, as the whole ethos, the atmosphere, of the song. It's not me. I just don't do that kind of thing. Mary Jo laughed uproariously, shaking her head, marvelling, I suspect, at the strangeness of this country in which she has come to live. "Hey listen, Robert," she said. "We're gonna do all kinds of songs. By the end you won't notice what the words are. You gotta relax, OK? Just relax." OK, I said. And then I sang *Kansas City* again.

Badly. ●

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Self

ROBERT CRAMPTON FINDS HIS VOICE, HOW YOGA CAN ALSO HELP CHILDREN, LESLEY McKENNA'S FITNESS REGIME AND MISS ABIGAIL'S TIME WARP ADVICE

Robert Crampton's age of enlightenment



I THOUGHT EVERYONE MIGHT like to know that I've dedicated much of the last week to playing an extraordinary amount of Snake II on my new mobile phone, resulting in a top score, so far, of 1,404, but I was assured by my editor that no one, not one single, solitary person, would be interested in this information. She ordered me instead, in pursuit of some pre-Christmas laughs at absolute rock-bottom prices, to send off for a chest wig. Naturally, I did as I was told. The wig, however, arrived too late for this week's deadline... though not, you may be pleased to learn, for next week's.

In the meantime I shall return, in keeping with my new dedication to seeing difficult things through, to my singing lessons on the south coast. Another train to Brighton, another rattle and sway through autumnal Sussex, another bracing walk along the front to my teacher Mary Jo Paranzino's flat – some 1.62 miles, according to my new Brighton A to Z. Another 1.62 miles in which I was regularly overtaken by the well-muscled men in which Brighton seems to specialise.

And another attempt – more successful this time – to delay the start of the actual lesson, Mary Jo graciously allowing me to slip into my default interviewer mode,

sharing her memories of her dad's love of Sinatra, her Italian-American family singing on a Sunday in Sixties Philadelphia, all gathered around the baby grand, bought for her, complete with hundreds of pieces of sheet music, for \$250 when she was in seventh grade. I can listen to other people's stories all day. I think this is a tactic I've evolved to avoid revelations about myself. Mary Jo told me about her time in charge of a gay and lesbian choir. "All the guys only want to be tenors. And the women... they want to be tenors, too! You gotta break them up."

But soon enough, she started up on her keyboard, and I had to get busy with the yah-ah-ahhhs and the ye-ee-ees and the too-too-toos. Mary Jo said I'd got a lot better, and even I could detect that was true. Two reasons, I think: first, as Mary Jo said, I am "beginning to recognise that different voices come from different parts of the body", ie, bass is in your lower chest, falsetto at the top of your head, everything else is somewhere in between. Second, much more importantly, the window behind Mary Jo was shut. During my first lesson a month ago, the window had been open. Try as I might, I'd never, throughout that lesson, been able to rid myself of the image of a crowd

of people on the street three floors down, stifling hysterics and beckoning strangers to come and have a listen.

After the warm-up we went straight back into *On My Own*, duetting through the entire first verse. Before, we'd spent 15 minutes on three words, so that was progress. Indeed I was, perhaps, marginally less cruel to the *Les Mis* classic than previously. On the tape, though, I still sound awful – brutally ignoring the first syllable to arrive after each long and grateful suck of air. "It's about getting relaxed, Robert," said Mary Jo. "It's about using whatever you can to hit those notes."

I began to imagine myself wearing a dress. A long, floaty dress!

I ought to explain that *On My Own* is written to be sung by a woman (at least I assume it is – it's a long time since I saw *Les Misérables*). It's full of lines like "pretending he's beside me" and "I feel his arms around me". I was belting this stuff out as best I could, trying to get with the passion of the lyric, and the strangest thing happened: I began to imagine myself wearing a dress. A long, floaty dress! And a headscarf – not a Nora Batty headscarf, but an elegant white silk headscarf, of the sort classy ladies wore in open-top cars in the Twenties. I was by the Seine, it was night-time, I was singing

about this man that I loved... and I'd turned into a woman!

What to make of that, eh? One obvious answer is that I am a closet transvestite. I had never suspected this, but it seems illogical to disregard this possibility entirely. We'll just have to see where that leads. For the time being, I reckon rather than this image was a sign that I am loosening up, starting to let go, as Mary Jo keeps urging I should. This is why these lessons are important to me. They are only partly about the desire to sing in tune: they're much more about freeing myself of my inhibitions, freeing myself of the necessity of always, in my northern naturalistic way, being this one version of me, this listener, rather than occasionally being able to be some other creation, some other character, some performer.

And the lessons are starting to work. The next song was a Bing Crosby number from the Fifties called *Hold Me, Thrill Me, Kiss Me*. It contains the line: "When you take me in your arms and drive me slowly out of my mind." A month ago? No way. This time, I gave it plenty – so much that Mary Jo shouted "Bravo!" and "Yessss!" and "All right!" It was great. She told me about a man she once knew, a drag queen as it happens, who couldn't sing to save his life but came to her twice a week for six months because he had hired the town hall to give the one big performance he had always dreamed of giving. And he gave it. Slowly, unbelievably, a plan began to form in my mind. ●

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