

On meeting Anthony Newley, my first question was does he prefer being addressed as Anthony or Tony? 'Oh, Sir Anthony, please', comes back the witty reply, whilst trying to keep a straight face. After the first flash of his cheeky, yet beguiling sense of humour, we settle on Tony.

Scrooge, *The Musical* recently had its West End premiere at the Dominion Theatre and Newley has been its star for four record-breaking tours, since creating the role in 1992. It went on to sweep the awards in Australia, where it played in Melbourne, and the Japanese production has just finished its second season in Tokyo. Dressed stylishly in neutrals, topped off with a pair of bright red braces adding a splash of colour, and sipping honey and lemon tea, Newley reflects on the 50 years he has spent in showbusiness, a half century that has encompassed 22 years of living in the States, 15 of those as a top class cabaret singer in Las Vegas, ranked in the same league as Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr and Tony Bennett. Renowned for classic compositions such as *What Kind Of Fool Am I?* and *Who Can I Turn To?*, one year he even beat Sinatra to become *Vegas Entertainer of the Year*. His collaborations with writing partner Leslie Bricusse produced gems such as

Bond theme *Goldfinger* and *The Candy Man*, an international hit for Sammy Davis Jr. He has a string of Tony nominations under his belt for the musical *Stop The World, I Want To Get Off* and *The Roar Of The Greasepaint - The Smell Of The Crowd* and has achieved great success as an actor, singer, composer, lyricist, director and producer.

I ask if he thinks the industry has changed for the better or for the worse over the 50 years?

'You can't divorce showbusiness from the social life that we live. The world is no better than it was and I am afraid showbusiness is no better than it was. I think it began to unravel in the sixties; that's when it started to go crazy. Everything seemed to fall slowly apart.'

Fame greeted him as a teenager, when he was cast as the Artful Dodger in David Lean's 1948 version of *Oliver Twist*. 'Success at such a young age can be terrifying, crippling sometimes. We have all seen what it has done to rock singers who haven't had any guidance. Success can do funny things to you, but also more so to the people around you and to the way they relate to you.'

Living with his aunt at the time of getting his first break, he didn't have his parents around to give him encouragement but says he has always had a strong sense of destiny and knew it was right.

'My dad had always wanted to be a singer. Mother always wanted to be a dancer but I guess in their lives, in the 1930s, it wasn't a possibility. My grandfather was a musician, he played oboe and conducted a brass band whilst in the army, so there was music in the family which I have used to good advantage.'

'I've always considered myself to be an amateur in the sense that I have never studied for anything. I remember doing *Stop The World I Want To Get Off*, for instance, in which I played a mime artist. Now I was never trained as a mime but remember seeing a film about French mime artist Marcel Marceau and thinking how beautiful that was, so I stole the thought and used it. As an actor I went to Drama School but I was up in the Boy's lav playing cards most of the time! There wasn't much dedication there, so I think I have been very lucky. I have never been a professional anything.'

Nor has Newley ever been a darling of the critics, most notably in 1970 when his autobiographical film *Can Heironymus Merkin Ever Forget Mercy Humpe And Find True Happiness?* was panned universally. As writer and director of the film, he co-starred with his wife at the time, Joan Collins. Shot in Malta, the avant garde piece centred around a married man with an eye for the women. It also starred their two children, Tara and Sasha.

'I'm glad you brought that up. In the end you just don't read the reviews. I haven't read them for years. You can't be better than what you are. You do what you do and you do it as well as you can and I would tell any young actor - don't read them. It's the oldest battle in the world between arts and the critic. Better men than me have suffered - Oscar Wilde, for instance, sideways and downwards.'

The critics were just as harsh when *Stop The World...* opened in London and New York but it didn't

EAGLETON'S ANGLE



TONY NEWLEY TALKS TO JULIE EAGLETON

stop the people queuing around the block for tickets, making it a smash hit.

'I don't know why it takes so long for us as performers to realise that the audience are out there because they want to be, because most performers think of them as the enemy. Then you realise that they are out there because they really like you, they have paid good money for the tickets, got a baby-sitter for the evening and they want you to do well. That's worth taking on stage with you.'

Of the Hollywood high life and time spent in Beverley Hills with close friends such as Paul Newman and Barbara Streisand, he said, 'It's funny but all of the time I was there I never felt it was real. It was like a dream. The money for instance. I never thought a dollar was worth anything. It was like play money, so coming back here was like waking up after 22 years and I realised it had almost been a dream.'

Did he miss anything about England whilst he was away?

'Yeah, everything', he says smiling and raising those famous eyebrows. 'Together with my family I spent most of the 22 years in California which is a cultural desert. It's not where you go to live a full textured life. It was comfortable, marvellously comfortable, and the life is lovely and relaxed but I missed the things that we take for granted, like the museums and the picture galleries. I can't put it down though; it was a wonderful life and they were very kind to us.'

When I asked about Las Vegas and what a typical day in the life of a cabaret performer was like, he said, 'Really kind of boring because you didn't get to bed until about 3.00am. You woke up just after lunch. Then out for a jog, a shower, something to eat, then you were back in to perform. I just caught the end of the good times. I was there in 1969 and the mob still ran the town and it was all very exciting. Being younger I had the energy to go out after the show and in those days performers were so happy to be in showbusiness. You dressed up to be a performer, you didn't dress down. The performers would meet afterwards and swap jokes and stuff and there was that wonderful camaraderie. The mob ran the town and all of the hotels and you couldn't avoid them. I never went to the casinos so that wasn't a problem but if you had talent you could have the world. They were very generous.'

They asked him what he would like as a gift and he said 'a chocolate brown Jaguar, please'. Sure enough, the next night, it was driven on stage for him.

'It was the safest place in the world to be. There was no crime as they would break your legs. It was a tragedy to kick them out as they knew how to run the place. At that time Vegas was where the stars went to play. It was kind of like a movie. I met everyone who I had ever wanted to meet there.'

Three times married, Newley has four children but he is now based permanently in England and lives with his mother in Surrey. Which of the performers around at the moment does he admire?

'It's difficult for my generation to find anything truly exciting around the younger generation. I still can't hear anyone that sounds like Streisand. I mean

when she sings a song what she does with a lyric just can't be found anywhere else. This is ageism, but I don't hear any music that is relevant to my generation. A boring thing to say but it's almost like a line has been drawn after the seventies. I listen to Classic FM in the morning. I love classical music. A man I do worship though is Burt Bacharach.'

David Bowie was once quoted as modelling his singing voice on that of Newley and a parallel can be drawn between their exaggerated use of certain vowels, but Newley doesn't know if this story is true. His East London accent is still apparent, although now softened by his Atlantic crossings. He recalls how Sammy Davis Jr used to say, 'Please don't send me any more of your demos because I end up singing like you in a cockney voice!'

I asked how he and Leslie Bricusse, long time songwriting partner and composer of *Scrooge*, first met.

'I was a rock and roll singer at the time and I had my own show called *The Anthony Newley Show* and Leslie came back stage with a mutual friend. I was very taken with him and thought he was enormously charming and bright and I decided that I would like to work with him. Soon afterwards we made up our minds to write a show. I was hoping we could write a show about a lot of girls and I could be in a dinner jacket and it would all be very glamorous but we went into a room and came out with *Stop The World...*, which of course didn't have anything to do with the original idea. It's an odd sort of karmic marriage. I remember a psychic saying that I had known Leslie at least a dozen times in previous lives, so there's not much I can do about it, is there?', he says with a hearty laugh.

Charles Dickens has been a prominent figure in Newley's life. First came *Oliver*, then *Mr Quilp (The Old Curiosity Shop)* in 1957 and now *Scrooge*. 'He was the great story teller and there is not one of his books that wouldn't adapt to the stage. I don't know of a better part than Scrooge. I'm of an age (65 this year) where it seems to fit quite comfortably. It's the most fulfilling role that I have ever had in my life. There isn't a thing I've done in my 50 years that isn't useful for Scrooge. For instance, when things go wrong you can either ignore it or have a laugh and a joke with the audience which tends to relieve the situation; 15 years in Vegas taught me that.'

With intelligent blue eyes darting back and forth whilst eloquently gesticulating his passion for Scrooge, I ask how he keeps the role fresh.

'Since I have been relearning the script I've seen lots of different things that I hadn't seen before. I've seen how much I hurry it and I've got to sit back. That's what is glorious about going away for six months and coming back to a role.'

After its London run the show is hoping for a Broadway opening next year. Selling out the notorious Rainbow Room in New York earlier this year with his cabaret act, he is held in high regard as a Broadway performer and is always treated like a star there. When walking down the street people say, 'Hey Mister Nooley, when ya comin' back?'. Odds are it could be sooner than they think. □