

FRANCES BARBER

The actress and the Pet Shop Boys.

(The Sunday Telegraph, 2001)

Until recently, Frances Barber was so embarrassed by her voice that even the bathroom tiles seemed too discerning an audience. Apart from an appearance as Nancy in a school production of *Oliver!*, she had never sung in public in her life: the suggestion that she should star in a new musical seemed ‘the most preposterous thing I had ever heard’. Nevertheless, in four days’ time [31st May] she takes to the stage of the Arts Theatre in London as the lead in *Closer to Heaven*, born again as a rapper and balladeer.

Her transformation began last year when the show’s creators, Jonathan Harvey and the Pet Shop Boys, held a workshop. Harvey had made an episode of *Murder Most Horrid* with Frances, and asked her as a favour to road-test the part of an ageing rock chanteuse. ‘The first time I sang, I stared at the wall with my eyes shut,’ she remembers, ‘because I couldn’t bear to look at anyone in the room: it was excruciating. But then on one of the performances I got a standing ovation, and the backers loved the character so much that they decided to build her up and make her the centre of things.’

So Frances finds herself as the compere of the night-club in which this tale of a bisexual love triangle is set. The backers must be patting themselves on the back, because talented as the younger members of the cast are, it is her experience and stage presence which hold *Closer to Heaven* together. She went down a storm with the audience at an early preview I watched – and though she will not be challenging Celine Dion quite yet, she acquits herself honourably as a singer.

She describes the show as ‘high-energy, very unsentimental and hard-hitting, with a lot of drug-taking and mad, lewd behaviour by gay boys.’ Her own character is not, she stresses, based on one particular person – ‘but think Marianne Faithfull, Nico, Anita Pallenberg: she’s a hybrid of all those Sixties chicks who pop up on *Never Mind the Buzzcocks*.’

Talking to her in the restaurant beneath the Arts Theatre, one can imagine the Sixties chicks staring in bemusement at her arms, which are so well-toned that she might be rehearsing the role of an Olympic gymnast. In a black crop top, with an armoury of bracelets and funky silver rings, she looks like a cross between Lara Croft and a biker’s moll. Her hair is scraped back in a pony-tail from her classically heart-shaped face, and her eyebrows are perfect circumflexes above her hazel eyes. Her teeth – much in evidence, since she laughs a great deal – are equally hard to fault.

Steven Frears, who directed her in *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, said that she was the least prudish person he had ever met. She admits, nonetheless, to being fazed by the gay clubs which she visited while preparing for *Closer to Heaven*. ‘It’s just sex and drugs,’ she says. ‘It’s frightening. All the boys have their shirts off and are high on something – it’s a free-for-all. I was with one of the girls from the show, and we were being sandwiched between these gay men, and she went, “What’s going on? They’d screw anyone in this club!” I think they must take Viagra, because everyone’s got an erection.’

She was also disturbed by the vanity of gay-club culture: ‘It’s all about how you look, and unless you’ve got the body beautiful, it’s not very kind.’ There were, however, compensations: ‘A couple of the boys in the cast go to clubs in drag, and they’ve been teaching me how put my false eyelashes on.’

An important element of the show's plot is Kesamin, a horse-tranquilliser known to clubbers as 'K', but Frances balked at trying it for herself. 'I've had to get other people to describe the effect to me, because I'm too old to start experimenting – I'm too frightened of all that.'

She may not belong to the method school, but she is certainly one of those actresses who are never off duty. In conversation she assumes any accent that presents itself – from muscle-bound queen to old-school theatrical agent – with the ease of an otter slipping into an estuary; she hauls on an imaginary rope to fly a sofa ('How camp is that?') high above the stage; her facial expressions shift and dissolve like patterns in an ever-twirling kaleidoscope. Even her normal voice is a construct – part North London, part *grande dame*, with a pinch of Kenneth Williams – bearing no trace of the Wolverhampton accent she once had.

Today, worryingly, she is slightly hoarse: six weeks of constant rehearsal have taken their toll. She has been having singing lessons since January from a leading voice coach, Mary Hammond, and was thrilled to see Hear'Say arrive one day just as she was leaving: 'I'd seen them on *Pop Stars*, and I thought, "I've got the same singing teacher as Mylene!"'

At 43, Frances has reached a point in her life where good parts for actresses are supposed to shrivel up like contact lenses in the Kalahari. Instead, she has two films about to come out (*Shiner*, with Michael Caine, and *Superstition*, with Charlotte Rampling); Luc Besson has offered her a role in his next production, and Jonathan Harvey is writing a sitcom for her set in the world of BritArt. 'I've had an odd career,' she remarks. 'I was playing the mothers of grown-up children when I was 30, and I'm getting more delicious parts now than I've had in a long time.'

This sense of being out of sync with her contemporaries is something she returns to again and again: it is as if part of her came to maturity too quickly, and the rest has only just caught up. She took responsibility

early, helping to look after her two younger sisters, but when she found success in her mid-twenties she felt desperately insecure: ‘I was a frightened little girl living in a big, fast world, and I had bulimia and all that stuff.’ She recently completed a course of therapy which lasted for many years, and believes that she has that to thank for the current blossoming of her career.

Although she does not come from an acting family, her mother had a fine singing voice, and Frances points out that that her father’s profession, bookmaking, has a strong theatrical element. ‘I don’t know if I always wanted to act,’ she says. ‘I fell into it in a way, and I kept thinking, “It’ll end in a minute”.’ Because of her parents’ belief in a rounded education, she studied English and drama (first at Bangor and then at Cardiff) rather than trying for RADA; she then joined the Hull Truck Company, and in 1985 was given her first starring role by the RSC, in *Camille*.

Looking back on her career, what strikes you is that for all her distinguished work in theatre, film and television, she has yet to find a defining role with which she is instantly associated. She herself detects a pattern of unexpected failure and equally unexpected success, in which any thoughts of superstardom have brought instant retribution from above.

‘*Camille* was a major hit, and I thought it was going to go to Broadway, and it did – but with Kathleen Turner, not with me. Then there was *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*: Steven [Frears] had had an unbelievable hit with *My Beautiful Laundrette*, and I thought, “This is it” – but it wasn’t. It’s as if the great pterodactyl in the sky is shitting on me and going, “You mustn’t be a clever clogs”.’

On the council estate where she grew up, Frances explains, this was a cardinal sin: ‘You were absolutely *not* allowed to get above your station.’

It would have been a splendid irony if the aristocratic role of the Bolter in *Love in a Cold Climate* had finally catapulted her into the firmament, but sadly the adaptation was too truncated to give her performance the airing it deserved.

‘They’re very frightened now of expanding costume dramas,’ she complains, ‘because they feel the audience is going to get bored. I think it’s a catastrophic strategy. I grew up on things like *The Forsyte Saga* and *Play for Today*, and they were a life force for me on an estate in Wolverhampton: they were my escape, my fantasy. We don’t want to see bloody cookery programmes and gardening programmes – they’re so patronising.’

It has been much remarked on that the actress who plays vamps so brilliantly has yet to find a husband, and she groans good-humouredly when the question is raised. ‘I thought I’d found my man several times,’ she says, ‘but unfortunately it wasn’t to be. I’m single at the moment – but then, most of my friends are. I just think it’s harder to compromise when you get older.’ When she recently experienced ‘rebirthing’ for the first time, the therapist told her to think of the men who had hurt her and send them on their journey with love and generosity: ‘Instead, I sent two of them to Kosovo.’

Nevertheless, she declares herself happy. She is very proud of her loft in Shoreditch, and has just acquired a bulldog puppy, bred by her great friend Timothy Spall; and who knows, *Closer to Heaven* may give her a defining role at last. She feigns horror at the prospect: ‘Oooh no – then I’ll be a gay icon.’ She roars with laughter again. ‘God help my future – I’ll be in *Torch Song Trilogy* for the rest of my life.’