

The *Art* of  
Comprimario



KEVIN RAWLINGS, THE METROPOLITAN OPERA

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's multi-Grammy-and-Emmy-winning, Guinness World Record holder John Easterlin transforming his way into another supersized role as a captivating musical theater and international opera performer.

*By Julia D. Berg*



**W**hile meeting with character tenor John Easterlin, B.M. '84, at a café near Lincoln Center in New York on a rare day off, the mild-mannered Miami native seems a far cry from his larger-than-life roles as the arrogant Adolfo Pirelli in Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, the lustful Monostatos in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, and the colorful Andy Warhol in Philip Glass's *The Perfect American*, a role he premiered to critical acclaim at English National Opera.

Hailed for his work in "compromisario," or supporting roles, the amiable Easterlin traces much of his singing success to the early 1980s with the UM Chamber Singers under the direction of late music professor Lee "Doc" Kjelson.

"Vocal versatility was mandatory," Easterlin recalls. "Doc insisted his students adopt the motto 'We do it all, we do it well.' We had to learn how to produce completely different sounds with our voices. We performed every style from madrigal to pop, rock to jazz. We not only performed, but we did all of the marketing, publicity, set design, scenery, load in and load out. We produced the show."

In the process, Easterlin discovered he had a knack for selling advertising to local businesses, which helped pay for the group's choral tours. He adds, "Doc always said, 'We're in the business of music, and our focus is to entertain. It's called show *business*, not show play.'"

Today Easterlin traverses the world performing in major venues and productions. "It's like watching a great film actor who is also a world class opera singer," said Marco

Bebreda of *El Mundo* in a review of Easterlin's performance as The Shabby Peasant in Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* at Teatro Real in Madrid.

When Easterlin was cast as The Magician in a Glimmerglass production of Menotti's *The Consul*, he took character preparation to a new level. He learned and incorporated 54 David Copperfield-level magic tricks, garnered a Guinness World Record for the most magic in an opera production, and was inducted into the professional magicians' Circle of Magic.

Anthony Tommasini of *The New York Times* said, "John Easterlin as The Magician delivered a show-stopping performance. A gleaming tenor voice, which never varied as he performed an unending array of world class tricks and illusions, Easterlin should be the go-to person for this role."

## UNDER THE FINGERNAILS OF A CHARACTER

John Easterlin's interest in the theatrical world started at age 5, when Met opera star Joy Clements, '56, took the young boy to a Greater Miami Opera dress rehearsal of *Hansel and Gretel*. (Clements had studied voice at UM, where she was a best friend of Easterlin's mother, Virginia.)

"In the second act, she took me backstage to see the stagecraft, and how the witch flew," says Easterlin, who now regularly plays the witch as a character tenor role.

John Easterlin made his Houston Grand Opera debut this year as Goro in *Madame Butterfly* and returns to San Francisco in fall 2015 for an appearance in *Sweeney Todd*. Last season he performed as Larry King in the U.S. premiere of *Anna Nicole* for New York City Opera, and as Andres in *Wozzeck* at Covent Garden in London.





By age seven, puppetry had become his passion. “It was my very first creative outlet. My parents bought me an FAO Schwartz puppet stage with eight hand puppets: a hillbilly, old maid, princess, alligator, dog, clown, and so on. After two months of doing shows in my garage, I started charging admission.”

When he was 10, he presented a series of puppet shows for the children’s ward at Baptist Hospital. His kindness came to the attention of *Miami Herald* writer and senior editor Jean Wardlow, who featured him in a front-page story titled “The Spirit of Christmas” on Christmas Day. He eventually amassed 400 puppets and a large stage, which he now keeps in cold storage and visits from time to time. “They’re doing fine,” he reassures.

“My parents supported my creativity. I tried many different things. If something didn’t work out, they would never make me feel like a failure or stupid, they’d just ask, ‘What else do you want to try?’”

The Easterlin family, which also included a younger sibling Janet, moved to Richmond, Mississippi when father Merrill Easterlin, a commercial realtor, “had a mid-life calling to the ministry” and became a preacher in a nearby church. John Easterlin took elocution lessons with a local teacher, Lola Barrett, who discovered he had the ability to pick up dialects easily.

“She introduced me to a book, *Life Studies* by Tom Powers, which contained published radio monologues depicting various regional dialects of the United States,” recalls Easterlin, who entered and won a local, regional, then national talent show as one of the Tom Powers characters. “It was Mrs. Barrett’s love of language, her love of a character, that helped me ‘get under the fingernails’ of a character.” Because for radio monologues, the vocal has to evoke an entire character, you can’t see the character.”

The family returned to Miami during Easterlin’s high school years. When he completed his studies at UM Frost, Easterlin recalls several joyful months singing and touring with the professional choral ensemble Fred Waring and The Pennsylvanians, who were “huge, huge, huge in their day.” Unexpectedly Waring passed away that late July. Needing a way to support himself quickly, Easterlin moved back to Miami and landed a job as an advertising exec at

Fox-TV, then at A&E. He enjoyed it but sometimes wondered, “What would happen if I moved to New York and tried a career in theater?”

Six years later he was asked one Sunday to sub as a soloist at church. “Out came a voice *way* beyond college!” He subsequently sang for friends at a dinner party where Robert Wright and George Forrest, composers of “Stranger in Paradise” were in attendance. They strongly encouraged him to consider turning pro. Easterlin called a Chamber Singers chum, Steve Mitchell, B.M. ’85, now a church music director in Hartford, Connecticut, for advice.

“What’s holding you back?” asked his friend. “What’s the worst thing that could happen? Once you know the answer, you’ll be ready to go.”

Easterlin realized his worst fear was that *nothing* would happen, and decided he had nothing to lose. “I bought a one-way airline ticket on Delta that departed at 10:10 a.m. on Saturday, September 15, 1990.”

While he was making the audition rounds in New York, he discovered he had a countertenor extension, meaning he could sing higher than most tenors. He landed a part as radio gossip columnist Mary Sunshine in the musical *Chicago*. It earned Easterlin rave reviews and a quick succession of bookings.

His debut at The Metropolitan Opera came 14 years later, in a production of Richard Strauss’s *Salome*. He’s also appeared on PBS’s *Great Performances* and *Live from Lincoln Center*, as well as a telecast, CD and DVD of Los Angeles Opera’s acclaimed production of Kurt Weill’s *The Rise and Fall of the City*



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John Easterlin, center, as Andy Warhol in the opera *The Perfect American* by Philip Glass.

of *Mahagonny*, for which he received 2008 Emmy and Peabody Awards, and two 2009 Grammy Awards for Opera Recording of the Year and Classical Album of the Year.

### PEOPLE PERSON ADAPTS TO THE ROAD

As much as Easterlin is drawn to the smell of the greasepaint and the roar of the crowd, he quietly shares that the hardest part of life on the road is “the loneliness factor.” Staging and blocking a new opera production can take three or four weeks, and singers often end up rehearsing the music for only a few hours a day. He reflects, “I’m a family person, a people person. I find it hard to be by myself; I’m always eager to meet people.”

Easterlin busies himself on the road with focused study about his characters. When preparing for the role of Andy Warhol, for example, he read seven books, watched five documentaries, personally inter-

viewed Warhol’s brother and friends, and studied hundreds of still photos and video of the enigmatic man.

“I painstakingly stood in front of a mirror to figure out his gestures, from his pinky to his neck,” Easterlin says. “The wan look. I dialed it all down to the bare essence.”

During the show’s run Easterlin went to the gym every day, “to exercise, sit in the steam room and sauna to sweat and drain every drop of water weight from my body” in order to fit into a body suit that was part of the costuming.

To bring some balance into his touring schedule, Easterlin recently developed a solo show entitled, *What a Character: John Easterlin*, which he enjoys tremendously. “I love to sing in the ‘pops’ format in concert work. I love John Williams, especially the piece he wrote with Alan and Marilyn Bergman, “If We Were in Love,” which I first heard Pavarotti perform on a Barbara Walters

television special... I have the original orchestration, and every single time I sing it, audiences are on their feet and in tears when I’m done. It taps into something core, the song transports me, lifts me out of myself.”

Easterlin ends the interview saying, “The School of Music is a big part of who I am. I want to pass it forward. I’d like to come back and talk practically to singers, and to perform on the Gusman stage again.”

He’s getting his wish at Festival Miami 2015, accompanied by pianist Mitchell Cirker, along with Frost School of Music students and faculty. ||

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John Easterlin as talk show host Larry King in New York City Opera’s American premiere of the opera *Anna Nicole*, by Mark-Anthony Turnage.



STEPHANIE BERGER PHOTOGRAPHY

## "You Have to Jump Right In"

While John Easterlin, B.M. '84, shared his insight on the art of character roles, *Score* asked other Frost School alumni and faculty members to chime in. Here's what they said.

"It takes a good actor to play the comprimario roles," states Tony Boutté, assistant professor of voice at the Frost

School of Music, a renowned tenor who also premieres new roles frequently. "When you step on stage, you have to immediately connect. When you play the lead, you can pace yourself. You have a certain energy, and journey, onstage. But for character roles, you have to jump right in."

Recent grad, tenor Justin John Moniz, M.M. '13, performed in numerous Frost Opera Theater productions while a student at Frost. He landed his first professional gig right after graduation,

to be able to make a career and a living with our voices. In my experience, most every singer starts out wanting to be a 'star' or leading singer. There are many jobs in opera, but not so many stars. If a singer has the ability to make it on the international opera circuit, the singer usually will start out singing supporting roles, though not necessarily what is considered to be 'character' parts. Some go on to bigger parts, some drop out, and some find the path of being a character singer."

Sarita Rachele Lilly, M.M. '01, performed as Sister Rose in the New England premiere of Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* and for an extended run as The Strawberry Woman in both the Tony Award-winning Broadway production and the First National Tour of *The Gershwins' Porgy & Bess*. She enjoys the musical theater environment because it "promotes collaborative artistry immediately, even from the learning stage." She adds, "The tour life gave me a chance to focus on one thing consistently

for nine months. That included creating friendships that are life lasting. We created history together."

Like Easterlin, Lilly and Boutté also reflect upon the loneliness factor of being on the road, as well as other discomforts.

Lilly suggests, "I think loneliness can become a factor on the road because you aren't always plugged into a home routine. Things are constantly changing so you have to adjust to something new,

different, or strange almost weekly. Some travel days meant that you were on a bus for 8+ hours with no WI-FI or electrical outlets, while others included nail-biting moments praying your luggage wasn't over the 50-pound limit."

Boutté shares that for some singers, the longing for a more regular home life leads them to choose to do more concert or oratorio work, which tend to be three- or four-day run-outs, rather than longer operas. "It's less glamorous," says Boutté, "but suits some singers better."

Despite its challenges, Lilly advises aspiring singers to "Never stop learning or dreaming beyond where you are presently. Limitations are always present but you don't have to take notice of every one of them. Once you have finished your degree, take time to fall in love with your artistry again. It's surprising how critical and comparative we become in academia. Musicology proves that you have to embrace your own contribution to art even while paying homage to those who came before you."

Character parts are most often associated with tenors, but sometimes with mezzo-sopranos," explains Assistant Professor Robynne Redmon, who performed recently as Madame Larina in *Eugene Onegin* with Arizona Opera and has performed at The Met and other major opera companies for decades. "I guide and advise my students to go in a direction that I think will most likely lead to their ability to get a J - O - B. The goal is

Justin John Moniz

Sarita Rachele Lilly