

# Caroline O'Connor

Pocket-rocket Caroline O'Connor returns to the West End this month, playing a racy tour guide in ENO's *On the Town*

## THE O'CONNOR FILE

Lancashire-born Caroline O'Connor has tread the boards extensively in London, New York and Australia. Having grown up in Sydney, she returned to the UK to study at the Royal Ballet School and appear in productions of *Me and My Girl*, *Romance*, *Romance*, *Cabaret*, *Is There Life After High School?*, *The Rink*, *Matador*, *The Challenge*, *Talent*, *Hot Stuff*, *A Chorus Line*, *Showboat*, *Salt of the Earth*, *Street Scene* and *Mack and Mabel*, for which she was Olivier-nominated. In Australia she played Anita in the 1994 production of *West Side Story*, picking up a number of prestigious local awards, followed by her turn as *Chicago's* Velma, a role she later reprised on Broadway. More recently, she has been seen as a high-kicking courtesan in Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*, Edith Piaf in *Piaf*, Judy Garland in *End of the Rainbow*, and in the Theatregoers' Choice Award-winning solo tour de force *Bombshells*. She has recorded four solo CDs and has featured on numerous cast recordings and compilations.



What has been your most demanding role?

Each one gets more demanding – maybe because I'm getting older – but I think Judy Garland in *End of the Rainbow* [Ensemble Theatre, Sydney] because of the responsibility. She's so idolised and everyone has their own idea of who she was. The play covers the last episode in her life, when she was most real – you got to see the rawness. It took a lot of research and I now have a slightly larger collection of Judy pictures, books and DVDs than even a gay man. I even have a rare recording of her where she's terribly emotional and drunk. I would play it in my dressing room during the run. The other actors told me to turn it off because it was too depressing. You actually hear her losing it. Playing Judy and singing those emotional songs truthfully eight times a week took a lot of effort. But I had to do it because I owed it to her.

What is the key to being a successful 'triple-threat' performer?

You've got to go to class, particularly from the dancing perspective. I started Irish dancing at four-and-a-half, classical at nine then spent two years at the Royal Ballet, plus jazz and tap. I sang every day, even though I had no intention of becoming a singer. But I never sat still, and that's the sign of a person born for the job. Yes, you can learn certain things, but you have to be totally and utterly in love with it, sometimes to the detriment of your emotional well-being.

*On the Town* is about three sailors making the most of 1940s New York in a single day. What would you do with only 24 hours in the Big Apple?

My first trip there was like a dream come true. There was a limo to pick me up and I was singing "New York, New York, a helluva town" in my head, perhaps slightly aloud. Strange looking back now that I'm in this show. As a holiday person, New York is just amazing, but I found it really tough living there. I'd probably just check out the sights – my favourite building is the Chrysler Building – and see the Radio City

Rockettes, the campest thing I've ever seen in my life.

How do you compare performing in New York with London and Australia? It's tough on Broadway. The competition is fierce. But there's really no time to sit around crying "poor me" because you have to move on to the next thing. The standard in Australia is amazing, but there's not much work so you

have to work terribly hard. In England theatre is a part of the culture, there's a sense that this is where it all began. Walk the West End and it's just all around you.

What's the greatest sacrifice you've made as an artist? Spending a lot of time away from family. When I first decided to go to London at 17, they worked day and night to support me because they wanted me to make the most of that opportunity. Of course, because I'm often 12,000 miles away, they can't see many of my shows and I have to fill them in. Thankfully, they're coming over for *On the Town*.

What's the best advice you've been given?

To watch. I had really good training in Australia: I went to a dancing school that was really strict. When you finished doing your thing, you had to watch the next person – what they did right, what they did wrong. I've taken that on board and I often stand in the wings for 15 minutes before I go on just to get the rhythm, to get in gear. In theatre you have to be part of a team, it's like being in a relay.

What has changed your world?

My husband. I don't know that I would have had the confidence to continue doing this if it wasn't for him. I met him on tour in *Cabaret* in 1986. We didn't actually see each other, we heard each other. He was in the orchestra and used to play two lovely solos and I was singing an understudy role. He asked somebody who I was and I asked somebody who he was. The noise we made was the first curiosity.

How would you like to be remembered?

That I did the best I could possibly do and have worked as hard as I possibly could. I suppose I've been having a passionate love affair with my work even though I know it's going to hurt sometimes. There are such wonderful highs. There's nothing better than walking away from a job having learnt something. 🍷

*On the Town* plays at the London Coliseum from 20 April to 25 May (0870 145 0200).