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Charles Spencer, *The Telegraph*

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*MailOnline Herald, Daily Post*

## EMMA WILLIAMS

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*David Chadderton, British Theatre Guide*

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*Kate Bissett, The Times*

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*Charles Spencer, The Telegraph*

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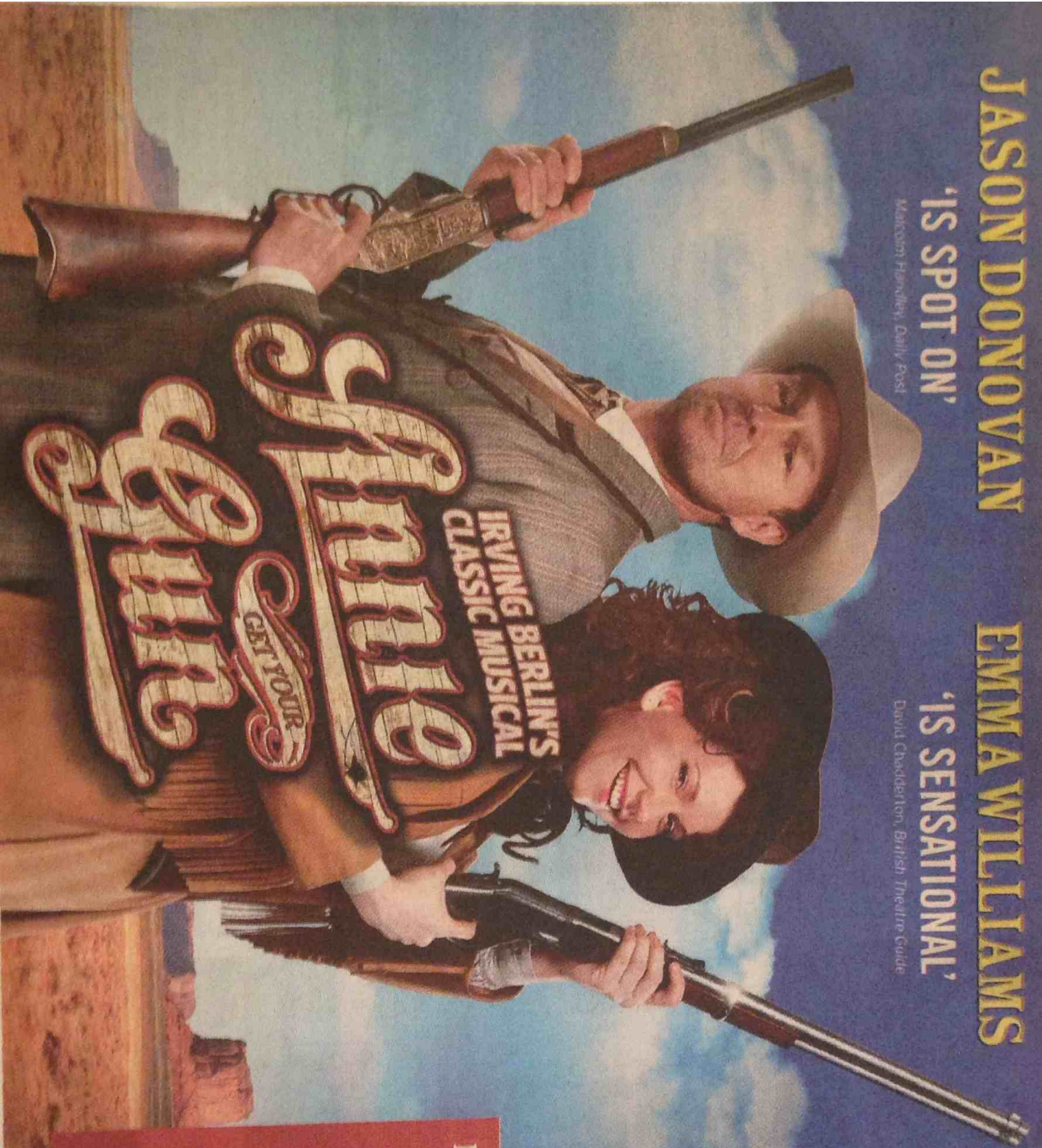
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# Niamh Perry

Niamh Perry's big break came on the BBC talent show *I'd Do Anything*, on which Andrew Lloyd Webber was a judge. The composer later cast the actor in *Love Never Dies*. Other credits include Johanna in *Sweeney Todd* at West Yorkshire Playhouse and Manchester Royal Exchange and Sophie in *Mamma Mia!* Earlier this month she finished playing Mary in the Union production of *The Beautiful Game*.

*You didn't take the conventional route of going to drama school. How did you prepare for your career?*

I had a very interesting route as a contestant on *I'd Do Anything* back in 2008 at the age of 17. However, I began classical vocal training back home in Northern Ireland at 11 and did my musical theatre diploma at 16, so I had been working on vocal technique from a young age. I have also learnt on the job since I began to work professionally. It has been so great to learn from the likes of Sally Ann Triplett, Sierra Boggess and Gillian Bevan.

*Was it a definite decision not to go to drama school?*

It wasn't a conscious choice not to train. After the exposure from the TV show, I was fortunate to get job offers right after I sat my A levels.

I'm a firm believer in 'everything happens for a reason', so I didn't ever question my path into the industry, I just accepted it and threw myself into it.

*Do you think there have been real benefits to the route you have taken?*

I do think that this was the perfect route for me. I've always been quite an impatient person and after the TV show I felt totally ready to work. That's not to say that I thought I knew everything, I don't think you're ever done learning.

*Do you believe it is important to keep up your professional development?*

I think working on your own skills and developing as a performer should be constantly tended to. It's also important to push yourself out of your comfort zone.

*Could you sum up your experience of the performing arts industry so far and what have been the highlights?*

I have loved the past six years and I'm excited for the future. That's not to say that it has been a walk in the park. Knowing how to put things into perspective comes with time and experience. My highlights have been gaining my first West End job in *Mamma Mia!* and creating the role of Fleck in *Love Never Dies*. The biggest one is probably



my last job, playing Mary in *The Beautiful Game*.

*What are your three tips for would-be musical theatre performers on the verge of going into training?*

- 1) Only decide to go to college if you can't possibly imagine doing anything else. It is so tough in the current financial climate.
- 2) Don't believe everything you hear. Gossip in the West End is rife.
- 3) Be positive. Negative attitudes send out the wrong vibes and it's important to remember that when you are working, you're in a very fortunate position.



# Follow the Piper for career success

Agent **Stuart Piper** explains why fitness is of paramount importance throughout your career and calls on industry figures to share their words of encouragement and advice

One of the reasons I thought I might make a good agent was because, as well as having worked in production in the West End, I had also been an actor myself (and one who had experienced both success and failure).

I found my true calling as an agent, and so don't regret any part of the path that led me here. But if I was to examine what I got wrong, I can identify many rookie errors. I went to Tring Park School for the Performing Arts with the likes of Amy Nuttall and Drew McOnie, and I showed off my strengths but was afraid to expose my flaws. If you don't have the courage to lay bare your shortcomings in class, then you never achieve your best.

For those that take the conventional route, many don't realise that even three years on a musical theatre course is not enough. Chris Hocking, head of the acting and musical theatre schools at Arts Ed, agrees: "Musical theatre graduates must not see their three years training as the end, but the beginning of their professional education. They need to listen to the advice of their agents and, most important of all, learn from themselves, which means reflecting on auditions, castings and performances. Maintenance and development of the skills acquired at college is essential, but that won't happen while waiting for the phone to ring and is sometimes difficult without your tutors nagging you to do it. Remember, you are only as good as your last audition."

Some artists, of course, don't go to full-time musical theatre college at all – two multi-award winning actresses come to mind: Sheridan Smith and my client Emma Williams. Funnily enough, both are two of the

hardest working actresses I know. Emma has just opened in one of the biggest roles in musical theatre, Annie Oakley, in a touring production of *Annie Get Your Gun*. She says her training on the job has never stopped, explaining: "In such a competitive industry, it's vital to keep yourself at your best. Whether that's through training in a gym, honing your talents in classes or challenging yourself to try something new each month. The scary fact is you can never stop learning, nor will you ever know everything there is to know. All you can do is try, every day, to make yourself the very best version of you there is to offer."

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**Keep fit in order to function at your best**

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My own advice would be to keep fit in order to function at your best. I recently took time out to recharge my batteries and I'm a convert to yoga, shiatsu and general healthier eating and fitness.

One of our clients, actress Clare Louise Connolly, is appearing in *War Horse* at the New London Theatre, but is also trained in yoga. She says: "The start in my professional career as an actor coincided with when I began a regular yoga practice. Yoga helps me to find some clear headspace, to calm and focus my mind. It also keeps me extremely fit, healthy and flexible."

It is also important not to forget that the voice is also a muscle that

ELIZA POWER



Stuart Piper

needs exercising. Top vocal coach and West End performer Rosemary Ashe says: "I suppose the best bit of advice I can give for musical theatre performers is to keep up their singing lessons. People have a tendency not to bother when they are working, and then say they can't afford them when they're out of work. The time to have them is when you are working, as it's so important to have another pair of ears and eyes seeing and hearing what you are doing and whether you are developing any bad habits."

Olivier award winner Paul Baker made his directorial debut with a production at the Guildford School of Acting. He says: "The industry is very diverse – take advantage of this and never be afraid to push yourself into uncharted territory. Perception is changed by you."

The shared sentiments of all my contributors seem well summed up by director Tara Wilkinson who we asked to coach Alexandra Burke in her preparation for *The Bodyguard* which she joins in June. Tara adds: "Your training never really stops after drama school. Whether you are lucky to be in regular performing work or not, you still have to keep practising all areas of performance and striving to be better each day. This includes sight reading and learning scripts, dance and singing classes and general fitness in case a job comes along unexpectedly."

## Annie Get Your Gun

Opera House, Manchester

May 22-24, then touring until October 4

Authors: Dorothy and Herbert Fields (original book), Peter Stone (new book and additional material), Irving Berlin (music and lyrics)

Director: Ian Talbot

Musical director: Stephen Ridley

Choreographer: Lizzi Gee

Producers: Ambassador Theatre Group, Tulchin/Bartner Productions

Cast includes: Jason Donovan, Yiftach Mizrahi, Norman Pace, Lorna Want, Emma Williams, Kara Lane

Running time: 2hrs 25mins

Dorothy Fields once recalled that when researching for this musical she discovered that sharpshooters Annie Oakley and Frank Butler were "about the dullest people in the world". Apparently Annie just used to sit in her tent and knit. But whatever Buffalo Bill's star troupers were like in real life, there's no business like show business for turning them into one of musical theatre's most spirited couples.

Indeed, a compelling aspect of this compact touring production based on Peter Stone's 1999 revised show-within-a-show book, is seeing how the transformative power of greasepaint and glitter brings the competitive crack-shots together in a marital truce – from Paul Farnsworth's big top set magically unfurling during the opening anthem, to Annie's progression from tomboy in buckskins to "softer and pinker" lady in silks and satins.

Talbot's unostentatious production is full of warm-humoured nostalgia for a lost world where show people smile when they're low, with lighting designer Jason Taylor bathing Lizzi Gee's hoedown dance routines in a golden retro glow and Irving Berlin's timeless score given a lift by Dan Delange's orchestrations for an on-stage nine-piece band.

As Annie, Emma Williams is note-perfect in every number

and always believable as a woman facing the ups and downs of showbiz who can get her man but only by sharing her gun. It's a shame that Jason Donovan's Frank tends to fire vocal blanks in the singing department. But the supporting cast and ensemble are all bang on target in a revival that will appeal to a wide audience.

*Roger Foss*



## **Sex and the Suburbs**

Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool

May 16-June 7

Authors: Claire Sweeney, Mandy Muden

Director: Ken Alexander

Producers: Royal Court Liverpool, Jamie Wilson

Cast: Lindzi Germain, Carl Patrick, Claire Sweeney

Running time: 2hrs 20mins

A versatile performer, Claire Sweeney has now co-scripted her first show, and it's an adults-only comedy set in the twilight world of a late-night sex advice radio programme. Sweeney stars in it too, alongside Liverpool funny woman Lindzi Germain, a last-minute replacement for co-writer Mandy Muden, who was taken ill just before opening night.

Sweeney plays Willow Wallace, a celebrity princess and guest of Germain's Penny Crowe, a motormouth agony aunt who solves listeners' hang-ups on air in front of a live studio audience.

Sandwiched in between them is camp producer Rory Reynolds (Carl Patrick). And when the callers ask advice about everything from low libido issues to transvestite husbands, they act the various scenarios and the evening turns into a sketch show about the many shades of sex, mixing the weird and the whacky with the gross and the ghastly, and climaxing with audience members on stage recalling their disaster blind dates.

The sketches are well-written and well-performed.

Standouts include Sweeney as an older woman dating a young street dude and Germain's racy solo routine as a sex toy "sexpert" hitting the comedy G-spot. But the show's live phone-in format could do with more structure and the power ballads seem bolted on.

Ken Alexander's production – his last as the Royal Court's artistic director – keeps the crude and lewd hen party atmosphere at full shriek and Mark Walters' fluorescent cityscape set design matches the brashness of a script that's packed with potential but not so hot at exploiting it.

*Roger Foss*

★★★★★

HEART

'THE HOTTEST TICKET IN TOWN'

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