

A Song and Dance Man

My son Michael Hopson has died peacefully aged 26 from a sudden pneumonia. Affected by a progressive condition since birth, Mike was a wheelchair user for most of his life, and had challenging difficulties in communication.

Reflecting on his circumstances, Mike once said, "It's not that I want to walk and talk, it's that I want to sing and dance." The wonderful thing is that by his own determination, the powerful advocacy of his mother Josie, and the extraordinary organisation that is the Orpheus Centre (an inclusive performing arts centre for young disabled adults founded by Richard Stilgoe), Mike did indeed find a way to sing and dance.

Mike was born in Brighton and educated there at Patcham House and then at Lord Mayor Treloar College in Alton (both special schools for disabled children). On leaving school he won a place as one of the first 'apprentices' at the Orpheus Centre in Godstone, where he lived and worked for four happy years, performing and preparing to live as independently as could.

Through performance Mike, alongside his fellow Orpheus Apprentices, was able to make an assertion about who he was and what he stood for, that was powerful, inspiring and deeply moving. His feelings were encapsulated in a song, "I don't think you're ready for me," which he wrote with Richard Stilgoe in 2002, and was first performed at the House of Commons in a presentation to MPs advocating the right



of disabled people to choose to live independently in the community.

Mike's song squarely addressed the point that people like him often seem to be invisible and are not seen for who and what they are:

*"Say hello to who I really am
See me.*

*Bring on the mask and costumes
Switch on the lights and see
Someone alone on an empty stage
The one who's standing there is me."*

Mike's family and friends got great pleasure from knowing he was performing at venues like the Royal Opera House, The Glastonbury Festival, The Notting Hill Carnival, The Brighton Dome, and many others besides. Mike himself was less impressed by the status of his gig list and the audiences of the great and

the good that he played to. He was a natural iconoclast, though his was an iconoclasm born of realism rather than cynicism.

His disinterest, for example, in meeting Prince Edward at the Royal Opera House, turned on the truth that he didn't know who the bloke was, and it wasn't obvious they'd have anything to say to each other. The subtle necessities of patronage and fund-raising were part of a theatre that he did not understand, which is not to say that he was unaware or unmoved by celebrity. As a teenager on the set of the Spice Girls film, he proposed to Emma Bunton who thrilled him by her delightful acceptance of the ring that he gave her!

What mattered for Mike was that in song, dance and performance he not only found a source of great pleasure and satisfaction, he also found a way of illustrating his deep commitment to the right of disabled people to determine the course of their own lives, and his strong belief that they are entitled to demand that the world should recognise and accommodate their needs.

Mike's ultimate success was that he did indeed find a way of living his final years, with support, in his own flat in his home town of Brighton, confounding the expectations of those who did not believe he was ready or able to make such a move, and despite the growing difficulties and pain of his condition and the reality of the social and environmental obstacles that further disabled him. That he died back at Orpheus whilst on an Indian Dance course is a consoling coincidence reflecting his continuing resolve to address the challenges of his circumstances.

It is gently ironic that there was standing room only at his funeral. Mike had a lifelong interest in film, TV and music that centred on sci-fi, humour and pretty girls. His current favourite shows were Charmed and Dr. Who. We sent him on his way in a coffin made up as a Tardis. He would have been amused and delighted by the surprise on people's faces as they saw his hearse makes its sombre progress through the streets of Brighton. "Who was that?"

It was Michael Hopson, song and dance man.

Michael Declan Melia Hopson was born on 25th July 1981 and died on 13th August 2007. He leaves behind Josie, David, Finn, Sal, Daisy and Wil, a huge extended family and many friends and supporters.

References

Orpheus Centre: <http://www.orpheus.org.uk/>

Richard Stilgoe: http://www.orpheus.org.uk/richard_biog.htm

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