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How we met - Richard Thomas & Lore Lixenberg

Best known as the originator, composer and writer of the stage hit 'Jerry Springer - The opera', Richard Thomas, 39, was born in Birmingham and studied English. He has also worked on his own double act, Miles and Milner, 'The League Against Tedium', 'Harry Hill's First Class Scamp' tour and 'The Frank Skinner Show.' He lives with his boyfriend in London. Born in Brighton, Lore Lixenberg, 36, studied composition and first performed professional opera with Theatre de Complicite in 1989. Having worked with Richard Thomas on various productions, she is currently playing Baby Jane in 'Jerry Springer - The Opera'. She lives in London and Vienna.

Richard Thomas

I first saw Lore in the summer of 1987. I didn't really meet her - she was performing some avant-garde music thing and I was in the audience. She was singing this weird sort of blues/baroque song and I was laughing my tits off at it. She played up to that. It was brilliant and I remember thinking, "Oh wow, I really want to work with this lady one day."

About a year later I moved to a damp squat in Brixton and it turned out that someone else who lived there was Lore's friend. In order to meet her, I arranged to take singing lessons from her. I'm a terrible singer and I didn't really want lessons but I thought it would be a good way of getting to know her. So she came round to the house and I knew straight away that she'd be a good laugh. Our lessons were a scream. She had me doing sit-ups and singing at the same time. She was in a bit of a health- freak phase at the time and she ran everywhere - she'd always be wide-eyed, her endorphins going crazy.

I was writing a lot of comedy, so I gradually managed to get her in on bits and bobs. I'd done a show at Edinburgh that had lost quite a bit of money and I had debts to pay off, so I arranged to do a stand-up tour of student unions and I got her to come with me and do all these terrible gigs. There was a lot of crowd control involved, so we devised something we called "the operatic insults". If someone heckled, she'd sing this really gross line in an operatic way to shut them up. It was a pitched battle between opera and audience, but it worked. I thought, "People are supposed to hate opera, they they're laughing and taking this in their stride." It made me realise that because opera is so extreme, you can get away with harsh stuff somehow. Much more than if it was spoken Deciding to do *Jerry Springer* as a grand opera came from the realisation that. It's perfect for opera - eight people on the stage screaming at each other, the audience screaming at them - it's the perfect simple idea. I remember when I had it I thought, "I hope nobody else has had the same idea because it's just so obvious."

There was no question Lore would be in it - I wrote the part for her. She's incredibly devoted to her art - she knows her limitations but she lives beyond them, And the great thing about Lore is that she doesn't quite fir into any stereotypes and that's why I love her. Considering how closely we've worked, it's amazing that our friendship has always been much more important than work. I talk to her about everything and we chat most days. We can descend into a kind of mutual Tourette's syndrome at times - which is our way of diffusing tension in crazy situations - and she can always out-gross me. So she's got these contrasts but the whole mixture and package is very bright - it's like a Klimt painting. Not an Egon Schiele. A Klimt!

Lore Lixenberg

The first time I saw Richard he was just this person in the audience, laughing. I belonged to an avant-garde group and they were serious about improvising. But the more serious I tried to make it, the more this guy laughed. As a result of his response, I got the sack they thought I was egging him on. But I wasn't at all. Then Richard began living, by chance with a friend of mine and the next thing, this creature came to me for singing lessons.

My first impression was that he was full of manic energy, couldn't sit still. Very intense, very clever and very rude. Exactly the same as he is now. His double act, Miles and Milner, had split up and he was doing a tour to pay back some debts and he said to me, "Oh God, I don't really have a partner to work with anymore, do you fancy doing what Milner did?" I said I'd give it a go even though I'd never comedy as a career before. Basically, I was working as a stand-up. I was the gimp, the anti-heckle device. If someone shouted, "You're rubbish", I'd sing, "Do you ever wonder why your imaginary friend committed suicide?" in an opera voice. It was unexpected and exciting. In opera, it's a converted audience, they're quite placid, but with this, there was an immediacy either you had the room or you didn't. Sometimes it was rough - there was one audience in Kingston where Richard said, "Lore, I warn you, they are known to be a rough audience. Whatever missiles they throw at you just duck." And it was true, they were animals. I've seen Richard's confidence grow. He always used to be slightly apologetic and he's lost that, which is a really good thing. He always says, "Comedy is a noble art", and he's really worked at it, tried things out and done lots of sketches to arrive at something which hangs together in the way that *Jerry* does.

In a lot of ways we are similar. We're both quite obsessive and work-driven, and we both have a profound love of what we do. He always says, "Don't conform just because you have to compete," and that's great advice. In opera you are constrained by stereotypes - your voice has to be a certain way and it has to match your body and you have to be stylistically correct - and if you fall into the cracks your life is quite tricky. He's taught me to value my differences and see them as strengths, rather than try to erase them.